

## **Everybody Talks** by HannahBerrie

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Friendship, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

**Pairings:** Eleven/Jane H./Mike W.

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-11-27 15:36:29

**Updated:** 2018-02-05 12:34:48

**Packaged:** 2019-12-17 00:36:07

**Rating:** K +

**Chapters:** 16

**Words:** 117,339

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** In which Mike Wheeler, president of Hawkins High's AV Club, falls for El Hopper, Hawkins' resident punk outcast (and secret telekinetic). They meet in detention. The rest is history. / an 80's high school au

## 1. Meeting

It's Friday afternoon and instead of hanging out at the arcade, Mike, Lucas, Dustin, and Will are trapped inside what has to be the dingiest classroom at Hawkins High. The lights flicker, half of the desks creak, and the ones that don't are covered in pencil-etched profanity and old gum. Even though the windows are cracked open, the late September heat still suffocates the stuffy classroom.

The boys are seated at the better-kept desks near the front of the classroom. It's their first time getting detention and no one's adjusting to it well.

"This place is disgusting," Lucas groans, slumping back in his seat.

"At least you didn't find radioactive waste in your desk!" Dustin complains.

Lucas eyes him. "A moldy tuna sandwich is not 'radioactive waste'."

"It smells like it!"

"No, it doesn't!"

"Guys, stop fighting," Will pleads. He holds his sketchbook in his lap, but can't seem to find the motivation to draw anything yet. He looks to Mike for help, motioning to Dustin and Lucas in exasperation.

"Seriously, guys, stop it," Mike says. According to what the principal had told them earlier, their hour-and-a-half of detention time was supposed to be supervised by one of the math teachers, Mr. Mortensen, but he hadn't arrived yet. Consequently, Lucas and Dustin had spent most of the time complaining about how miserable they were.

"I'm just stating the facts!" Lucas says in his own defense.

"So am I!" Dustin insists.

"You guys are being overdramatic," Will states. "We've only got an hour left."

The other boys groan and slump back in their seats. "I wanted to go to the arcade," Dustin mumbles, "I was *so close* to getting the high score on *Missile Command* last week."

"Well, technically, we could just leave right now," Mike reminds them. "There's not even a teacher here!"

"Oh, right," Lucas scoffs, "Let's all take advice from the guy who got us here in the first place!"

"How did I get us here?"

"It was your idea to start selling our test answers to people!"

"Like you didn't want to! Selling your answers got you a new Atari!"

"It doesn't matter! I didn't even really want to in the first place, and now we're totally screwed! We're lucky we didn't get expelled!"

Mike opens his mouth to reply but is cut off by the sound of the creaky classroom door swinging open. The boys quickly fall silent and straighten up in their seats as Mr. Mortensen trudges in with two other students in his wake.

The boys' eyes fall on the two students walking in, but quickly move to glance at each other in shock once they realize who those students are.

"That's Max Mayfield and El Hopper!" Dustin hisses as the boys lean their heads in.

Max's long red hair hangs flat against her back, looking disheveled from the way she keeps combing her fingers through it. In contrast, El's hair is slicked back, though a few pesky strands curl around her face. Both are sporting well-worn jeans, smudged kohl around their eyes, and expressions that scream how much they don't care about whatever speech Mr. Mortensen is giving them (said speech involves a lot of *how-dare-you-try-to-skip-out-on-detention's* and *you-two-young-ladies-should-be-ashamed-of-yourselves's*).

"Aren't they supposed to be really bad?" Will whispers nervously.

"Yeah, from what I've heard, Max is always getting in trouble," Dustin explains, "Like, she's *always* in the principal's office."

"Isn't El the police chief's daughter?" Lucas asks.

"I'm pretty sure. So, basically, she can do whatever she wants. She probably even knows how to get away with murdering someone!"

"Don't be stupid!" Mike replies with an eye roll, "Do you actually think that they're murderer?"

"I'm not saying they're murderers!" Dustin says indignantly, "I'm just saying that they totally could murder someone, if they really wanted to."

The boys pull away from each other as Mr. Mortensen takes his seat at the front of the classroom. While the other guys keep their heads low, Mike eyes Max and El as they walk past and take their seats in the back of the room. While he's definitely heard the kinds of rumors his friends have, he has to admit that Max and El don't look *totally* terrifying. Mike's pretty sure that El's in his sixth-period biology class, but she doesn't ever cause any problems there. She, like Mike, mostly keeps to herself.

The next few minutes are painfully quiet. Mortensen sits at the front of the room, doing the crossword puzzle in the *Hawkins Post*. Time drags by, and in the sweltering, quiet classroom, every minute feels more like a millennium. Throughout it all, the boys can feel the girls' eyes on their backs, sizing them up, scrutinizing them.

Will's distractedly scribbling away in his sketchbook, Dustin is not-so-sneakily reading a comic behind his science textbook, Lucas is staring at the clock, and Mike is absentmindedly fidgeting with the Rubik's cube he carries around when there's a knock on the door.

The kids look up as the door opens to reveal the school secretary. "Harold?" She says to Mr. Mortensen, who looks up at her perplexedly, "There's a phone call from your wife in the office for you."

"I can't leave right now," he grumbles in reply, making a sweeping

gesture towards the kids, "Tell her I'll get back to her."

"She sounded really upset," the secretary hesitates, "Something about an accident with the baby and your baseball card collection?"

"Shit," Mortensen mutters. He gets up from his chair and moves towards the door before turning back to point at the kids. "Don't even think about leaving this classroom," he orders, "I'm gonna be — don't roll your eyes at me, Mayfield — I'm gonna be right back."

He turns to leave with the secretary, closing the door shut behind him.

And then they're alone.

"Shit," Dustin mutters, glancing at his friends nervously.

Mike motions for him to shut up, to which Dustin not-so-subtly motions at the girls, themselves, and makes a throat-slitting gesture.

"What are you doing?" Max asks suddenly.

The boys flinch and slowly turn back to face the girls. Max and El are eyeing them, expressions unreadable.

The guys glance at one another, each daring someone else to speak, before Mike finally offers, "Nothing!"

"You're lying," El says simply.

Mike meets her gaze and El suddenly falters in her tough demeanor. She glances away from him quickly, tucking one of her stray curls behind her ear.

*Weird.*

"It was nothing," Will says, "They were just being dumb."

Max snorts in response before slumping back in her seat, looking bored again. "So, what are you guys in for?" She asks next, putting her legs up on her desk.

While Lucas looked anxious when the girls had first walked in, Mike now notices that his entire demeanor has changed. He keeps glancing at Max, then away again, looking almost shy. "We sold our test answers," he answers quickly. "To students. For money. We were really good at it."

"You just said you didn't even want to do it!" Mike exclaims in disbelief.

"No, I didn't!" Lucas says through his teeth, giving Mike a warning look.

"You kinda did," Will mutters, trying not to smile.

"You guys realize that that's like, the nerdiest way to get detention?" Max teases.

Lucas blushes.

"So?" Dustin rolls his eyes. "It's not a competition. What are you guys even in here for?"

"We torched Mr. Coleman's car," Max smirks.

"You SET the principal's car on FIRE!?" Dustin exclaims, looking horrified.

"No!" Max scoffs. "We just spray-painted some flames on the side."

"It'll wash off," El mumbles, looking at her nails.

"You guys are literally insane," Dustin replies, shaking his head. "Like, full-on demented."

"And you guys are literal losers," Max snaps back, "Like, full-on geeks!"

El nudges her, and Max throws her an apologetic glance before shrugging. "Well, it's true! Everyone knows that the A.V. Club is for nerds!"

"The A.V. Club isn't for nerds!" Mike says defensively.

"Says the president nerd," Max comments.

"How'd you know I'm the president?" Mike asks suspiciously.

"I don't," Max replies, rolling her eyes towards El.

Mike and El's eyes both widen, and El quickly gives Max another nudge.

"Max," she hisses, cheeks bright pink.

"I didn't say anything!" Max hisses back.

"At least we're not literal criminals," Dustin remarks, still grumpy over the 'nerds' comment.

"They're not criminals," Lucas says, throwing Max a glance, "It's not illegal to paint a car."

"Uh, it's called 'vandalism,' Lucas," Dustin scorns.

"Uh, it's called, it's not that big of a deal," Max cuts in.

As they all continue to bicker back and forth, Mike notices El get up and move to over to the window at the back of the classroom. She sits on the wide ledge that runs along the back wall, her expression downcast.

Mike, meanwhile, is still reeling from finding out that El knows he's president of the A.V. Club. It's not that it's secret information or anything, but it's not exactly well-known either. Mike had to fight with the yearbook committee to get their photo featured last year (apparently a group comprised of four freshmen didn't 'count' as a club, by their ridiculous standards).

El knew some things about him. So, what did that mean?

She's still sitting by the window, looking upset, and Mike's curiosity is definitely heightened. So, hoping that Dustin really wasn't right about the whole murderers thing (because he didn't want to like, get shoved out a window, or anything), Mike gets up from his desk and casually goes to sit beside her, making sure two leave a good foot or two of

space between them.

The guys and Max are still arguing (well, Dustin and Lucas are, Will is just looking back and forth between them and trying to keep everyone under control) and thus are oblivious to Mike's change of seat.

El, obviously, notices right away. Her eyes widen again before narrowing distrustfully, but Mike only glances at her before returning to fiddle with his Rubik's cube.

"Hey," he says nonchalantly.

"Hey," El replies stiffly.

They're silent for a moment, and as awkwardness sets in, Mike starts to regret his decision to come over here. What *was* his plan, anyway? What was he supposed to say? *Hey, so, I saw you looking kinda lonely over here, and I thought I'd come sit by you, for no apparent reason. Yeah, I know, it's weird. Yeah, I'm kinda a total wasteoid.*

"So, uh, are you ok?" Mike asks, trying to make some form of conversation.

El's brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"You just seem kinda..."

El stares him down.

"Down," Mike says quickly, "Like, sad."

El continues to look at him for a moment, then she leans forward and grabs the Rubik's cube from his hands. Mike's surprised but doesn't protest as she begins to fiddle with it.

"It's just...my dad's gonna kill me," she mutters, not looking up at him, "When he finds out I got detention."

"Don't you get detention a lot?" Mike asks, before quickly adding, "No offense."

El continues to work the Rubik's cube. "No, just Max. She takes the blame most of the time."

"But today you both got caught?"

"Yeah."

"That sucks."

"Totally."

They fall silent again, and Mike takes the time to examine El a bit more closely. She's wearing scuffed-up sneakers, a braided blue bracelet, and an oversized flannel shirt over an old band tee. Her nails are painted black, though he can see freckles of orange paint splattered across them. As she plays with the Rubik's cube, her brow is furrowed with determination.

"I'm sure your dad will understand," Mike says, "I mean, he deals with actual criminals all the time, so it's not like a paint job is the worst thing he's ever seen."

"No, he's gonna be so mad," El laments, "I shouldn't have done it."

"Then why did you?"

She glances at him. "It was fun." Mike snorts in laughter, and the two exchange brief smiles before she counters, "Why'd you sell your tests?"

Mike shrugs. "I needed the money."

El eyes him. "For what?"

Mike feels his cheeks warm slightly. "Uh, you know. Like...comics and video games and stuff."

He waits for El to mock him, something that he's grown accustomed to when it comes to discussing his passions. But surprisingly, she doesn't make any comments about the comics. "You could get a job," El instead points out, "If you want money."

"I guess," Mike admits. A beat passes before he adds, "You could find other things to do for fun."

El smiles again, and it's a sight that Mike quickly finds himself growing accustomed to. Her shy gaze meets his, and he suddenly feels like his stomach is doing flips and his heart is skipping in his chest.

*Super weird.*

Before they can say anything more, Mr. Mortensen returns. Dustin, Lucas, Max, and Will stop talking just as Mike and El jump up and quickly return to their seats.

Mike tries to not look too disappointed as he returns to his lopsided desk. Regardless, He can feel the blush spreading on his cheeks, and he makes a point of ignoring the incredulous looks from Dustin and the questioning stares from Will (Lucas, still glancing back at Max, has yet to notice that Mike and El were ever alone together in the first place).

"Sorry about that," Mortensen announces, sitting back at the front desk. "Family emergency."

"About baseball cards?" Max mutters, to which all the kids snicker.

Mortensen evidently doesn't hear this and returns to his crossword puzzle. "You guys still have another thirty minutes," he reminds them, face obscured by the newspaper.

Even though they only have to stay for another thirty minutes, it once again feels like hours. Mike tries to pass the time by planning out D&D campaigns in his notebook, but his mind keeps going back to his conversation with El.

She's definitely different from what he'd thought she'd be, based on her reputation. She seemed...*friendly*. And she was pretty easy to talk to. From time to time, Mike looks over his shoulder to glance back at El, but she never returns his gaze. She instead keeps her head low, focused on something in her lap.

When the thirty minutes is up, Mortensen glances up at the clock.

"Alright, you guys are free to go."

The kids dart up from their desks, excited to finally be free from the confines of detention. "Finally!" Will whispers, while Dustin grins and adds, "We still have time to go to the arcade, right?"

Max grabs her backpack and walks past them as she heads out. "See ya' around, nerds," she says, lightly punching Lucas in the arm.

Lucas' cheeks flush. "Okay!" He replies excitedly (instantly earning himself a mocking, mimicked "Okay!" from Dustin).

Mike gets up out of his seat. He's tossing his things into his backpack when, without warning, someone grabs his wrist and presses something into his palm.

It's his Rubik's cube, perfectly completed.

Mike's eyes widen in disbelief, but when he looks up, El is already following Max out the door. She turns to glance back at him one last time, smiling shyly, and Mike's gut feels like he's suddenly taken a deep plunge, like the swell of excitement someone gets before a rollercoaster drop.

"Can you believe those girls?" Dustin remarks as the boys head out. They walk down the hallways of Hawkins High, deserted albeit the distant hum of a janitor's vacuum or the echoing screeches of sneakers against tiled floors.

"They're not so bad," Will replies, "They seemed kinda cool."

"Max called us nerds!"

"We are nerds!" Lucas reminds him.

"Doesn't mean she has to say it! Besides, you're only defending her because you have a weird crush on her."

"I do *not* have a crush on Max," Lucas says a little too defensively.

"Sure," Dustin replies sarcastically. "And Mike totally wasn't drooling over El, either."

"I was not!" Mike says, also a little too defensively.

"You have to admit, they're pretty awesome," Lucas states.

"I guess," Dustin shrugs, "If by 'awesome,' you mean 'crazy.'"

"Whatever, let's just head to the arcade," Mike directs, "It's only 5, we still have time before sundown."

That gets their attention. The conversation quickly switches from girls and crushes to *Dragon's Lair* and *Dig Dug*. As the guys debate who amongst them is going to get the highest score, Mike re-examines the Rubik's cube in his hands.

He feels...different, but in a good way. In a weird way. In a way that, even as he heads to the arcade to play video games with his friends, bikes home after dark, wards off his worried parents' frustrations, gets ready for bed, and carefully places the Rubik's cube on his nightstand, he can't help but hope that maybe, just maybe, he'll get another chance to speak with her again.

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[A/N]: This was originally written to be a one-shot, but I still have tons of more ideas for it! If you guys like this, feel free to leave comments or shoot me message over tumblr, and let me know!

## 2. Frogface

[A/N]: Thanks to everyone for sending such lovely messages of support! This is going to be an official story now, probably around 13 chapters. Once again, thanks for reading!

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It started in history class last year.

El's teacher had been trying (and failing) to set up the overhead projector for 20 minutes. Meanwhile, the class was growing antsy by the minute; hushed whispers quickly escalated into full-on conversations, laughter, and before long, no one seemed to care that they were even in class anymore.

The teacher had not only given up on trying to hold back muttered curses of frustration, but also on fixing the projector himself. As the students chucked spitballs and paper airplanes at each other, he called the office, asking for an A.V. club student to come over and fix the "goddamn thing."

Minutes later, Mike had walked in wearing one of his dorky wool sweaters and a hall pass lanyard around his neck. "What's the problem?" He'd asked, glancing between the rowdy class and red-faced teacher in both hesitation and alarm.

"This damn projector won't turn on!" The teacher huffed in reply, "All these good-for-nothing technologies they make us use now...back in my day, there was nothing wrong with good, old-fashioned books and chalkboards!"

"Right," Mike had said in a dismissive sort of way that made El snort. He moved over to examine the projector more closely, getting out a handful of tools from his backpack.

El had watched as he worked, and though he didn't notice her, she found herself noticing *everything* about him. Like the way he pushed up his sleeves, the way he looked so *focused*, the way he tucked his pocket screwdriver behind his ear when he wasn't using it, or the way that smiled excitedly when he'd figured something out.

Her heart had done a weird flip-floppy thing in her chest, and as it beat slightly faster, it matched the rhythm of her train of thought: *cute, cute, cute, cute*.

For a moment, she'd wondered if she was getting sick. She certainly felt like it. Sick and crazy and ridiculous. She knew nothing about him but wanted to know everything.

"There," Mike had said once he'd finished, "You just had to adjust the Fresnel lens, nothing serious."

The teacher furrowed his brow. "The *what*?"

"The condenser?" Mike offered. When the teacher still looked lost, Mike continued, more slowly, "The big glass thing."

"Oh. Thanks."

"No problem."

Mike left the room, El was left reeling.

He's still wearing that same sweater today, El notices as she sneakily examines him from across the biology classroom. Even though he's seated in the front row and she's all the way in the back, she still has a pretty good angle on him. Since his back is to her, she doesn't even have to worry about him catching her.

As she watches him take notes, she half-heartedly realizes that she's kind of acting like a total weirdo. Then again, that isn't far off from her reputation around school.

El knows what other kids at school think of her. She's not an idiot — she sees the frightened glances she and Max get in when they enter school with their ripped jeans and dark eyeshadow, or the whispers that are exchanged when they're busted for something.

And yet, while every other student seems to notice her, and how *different* she is, to Mike, she's practically invisible.

Well, at least, she *was*.

Her mind goes back to last Friday, to that grungy detention room. When El and Max had entered, and El had seen *them, him*, she hadn't been able to stop herself from gasping, though it was only loud enough for Max to hear.

"*What?*" Max had hissed, glancing back at her.

"Nothing," El had muttered quickly.

"You know these dweebs?" Max moved her gaze towards the boys in their desks.

"I know Mike," El had admitted, hoping she didn't sound too nervous, "He's president of the A.V. Club."

Mortensen had turned to lecture them after that, shutting down any further questions from Max, which El was immensely grateful for. She's definitely not ready to let Max know that she has a crush on a 'dweeb' like Mike. She'd never hear the end of all the teasing.

But despite Max almost finding out about her crush, last Friday was definitely the best day ever. Mike had *sat right next to her*. Without her even *asking*. And he'd *talked to her*.

Just thinking about it makes El want to explode, but in a good way. It also makes her doodle hearts in the corner of her notebook as she daydreams about Mike and all the various ways he could confess that he can't stop thinking about her, either.

She's in the middle of imagining an elaborate scenario that involves a bouquet of waffles and a motorcycle ride when she abruptly realizes that everyone in the class, including the teacher, including *Mike*, is staring at her.

She freezes, wishing more than anything that she could disappear. Should she say anything? She can't just keep sitting here, looking like a total mouthbreather...

"Eleanor?" The teacher, Mrs. Hawthorne, asks. She's looking at El over the rim of her glasses, the way she always does when she's had it up to *here* with someone. "Can you answer the question?"

*What question? She wasn't even listening!*

El swallows, cheeks feeling hot. "I...uh...I don't know," she mumbles quietly.

"*I don't know,*" Troy, Hawkins High's resident asshole, quietly mimics in a squeaky voice, earning a hushed round of snickers from his cronies.

El gives him a death glare, but Troy ignores her.

"That's ok," her teacher says gently, "But you need to pay attention." This only causes more snickers from Troy and his friends, and El can feel her hands start to shake.

*Keep it under control. Not here, not here.*

She takes a deep breath and relinquishes her grasp just as the teacher asks, "Can anyone else answer the question?"

Mike raises his hand, and El feels her heart skip a beat. "The nictitating membrane is a frog's third eyelid," He answers easily, "It helps the frog keep its eye moistened."

"Frogface," Troy not-so-subtly coughs.

Mike rolls his eyes, but El notices the red tinge of embarrassment creeping up his cheeks. For the second time in the past minute, she wants to completely destroy Troy, or, at the very least, give him what he deserves (which, to be fair, is complete destruction).

"Thank you, Michael," Their professor says, throwing Troy a dirty look. "Now that we've covered the pre-lab questions, I think we oughta get started with the experiment."

*Experiment?* El turns her focus to the board, trying to remember what they're even studying right now.

"For the frog dissection, I'm going to assign you partners at random," Mrs. Hawthorne explains.

Oh right. They were dissecting frogs today. Remembering this makes

El's stomach churn, and she starts to feel anxious. This is a class that she's been dreading ever since their teacher first mentioned it, though she'd completely forgotten that they were doing it *today*.

Mrs. Hawthorne starts reading out names in pairs, matching students up with their respective lab partners. El crosses her fingers under her desk, hoping, *praying*, she won't get Troy. He's the only thing, at least that she can think of, that's more disgusting than having to cut open a frog.

"Eleanor..."

*Please not Troy, please not Troy, ANYONE but Troy...*

"...You'll be working with Michael."

El freezes. *Michael? As in...*

Mike turns to glance back at her with a small smile, and El feels herself melt. Seriously. Her heart feels all mushy and her stomach is all flip-floppy and it takes everything within El to not grin like an idiot. Nevertheless, she's able to maintain the indifferent, stoic look that she often sports around school — the look that shields her from seeming like the total dope she feels like on the inside.

Mrs. Hawthorne finishes pairing up the rest of the class. When she tells everyone to get started, the whole class gets up in a chaotic flurry of movement. Everyone's running to either their partner, their lab table, or the supply closet in the back of the room. El is just rising to her feet — legs feeling like Jell-O — when suddenly Mike is standing *right in front of her* and she's trying to remember how to blink properly.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," she replies, suddenly feeling self-conscious about *everything* she's doing, like how she's standing. Should she put her hands in his pockets, like he's doing, or should she cross them? On her hips? WHY was worrying about this, again?

"So, I guess we're like, partners," Mike says.

"Yeah," El says, amazed at just how nonchalant she's able to sound, considering the circumstances.

Mike glances around the busy classroom. "So, I can go get the supplies, if you want, it looks pretty gnarly back there," he offers. "And you can get us a table."

El nods. "Okay."

Mike gives her another small smile, and despite her desperate attempts to remain as laid-back as possible, she finds herself smiling back.

The two part ways. As El finds them a lab table, she can't help but feel frustrated. Being closed-off from people is her form of protection. It keeps people like Troy from learning her vulnerabilities, and, she realizes as she glances down at her own hands, her strengths.

*But Mike...*

Mike undoes everything. Mike makes El want to smile and giggle and blush and act like a total knucklehead. She's happy with being a loner, happy with being able to trust Max and Max alone. It's safe, comfortable. Her feelings for Mike, on the other hand?

Completely terrifying.

Mike returns with a tray of goggles, gloves, forceps, pins, and a plastic container that smells an indescribable kind of terrible. The pungent odor makes El crinkle up her nose, and she looks up at Mike skeptically.

"Yeah, this thing totally reeks," Mike gripes, passing her a pair of safety goggles.

"Totally," El agrees, taking the goggles. Their fingers brush for the briefest of moments, and El feels her cheeks grow warm.

El tries not to stare as Mike slips on his safety goggles. The strap brushes against his hair and makes it *floof* up slightly.

*Cute, cute, cute, cute.*

They slip on some plastic gloves, line the tools up in a row, and remove the frog from the plastic container. El feels her stomach churn again as Mike lays the frog's stiff, frozen body out on the tray.

Mike gets out their teacher's Xeroxed lab instructions and reads them over quickly.

"Alright, so," he begins, pushing up his sleeves and getting their tools out, "It looks like we have to identify the organs and fill out the diagram on this worksheet," he turns to her, holding out the scalpel, "Do you want to do the cutting?"

El's eyes widen. She glances at the scalpel, at Mike, and shakes her head quickly. "I'll do the worksheet," she offers, pulling the paper closer to her.

"Aww, you're not scared, are you?" Mike teases. "It's just a little frog." He holds up the frog's arm and makes it wave at her.

"No!" El tries to hold back both a giggle and cry of disgust, but instead gives off a strangled sort of snorting sound that only makes Mike smile even more.

El composes herself and gives him her best-annoyed look, "It's gross."

"It's not THAT gross," Mike replies, "I mean, it's a little gross, but it's also super cool! Like, we're gonna get to see all his intestines and his liver and stuff!"

He's definitely not wrong about that.

Once Mike cuts the frog open, they can see every last veiny, slimy, nasty organ inside. El keeps her eyes trained either on Mike or their worksheet, knowing that she won't be able to last a minute if she has to keep looking at the poor frog.

Mike seems aware of this, as he doesn't tease her anymore. Instead, he takes on the tasks of cutting, examining, and prying. He seems really into it, if the way he excitedly babbles about the abnormal length of the spleen means anything. Even though it's still super gross, the way Mike explains it to her — passionately, earnestly, an excited glint on his eye — she can't help but admire his efforts to

make it less scary.

He's a total nerd about the whole thing, and yet, El finds herself loving every moment of it.

When the class ends and it's time to pack up, El finds herself actually upset that it's over.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Mike asks her as they properly dispose of the frog and remove their gloves, "I mean, it smelt really weird, and I know you didn't like all the organs, or how it kinda squirted frog guts everywhere when I accidentally punctured the —"

*"Mike,"* El cuts him off, not really wanting to relive that particular moment, "It was fine."

"Really?" Mike slides his goggles up, and now that they're resting in his scruffy hair, El notices the splay of freckles scattered across his nose and cheeks.

*Cute, cute, cute, cute.*

El swallows and nods. "Yeah."

Mike gives her another smile as they finish cleaning up. They conclude just as the bell rings, signaling the end of class.

As their classmates file out of the room, El goes back to her desk to get her things. Mike grabs his backpack and slowly makes his way over to the doorway but doesn't leave, and it's only when El notices the glances he keeps giving her that she realizes he's stalling for her.

El holds back a smile as she makes her way towards the door, hoping Mike can't tell that every step she takes towards him makes her heart flutter all the more.

"By the way," Mike says as she approaches him and the two walk into the bustling hallway together, "How'd you solve my Rubik's cube? I've been working on it forever."

El shrugs, still a little unsure herself. "I just tried."

"Seriously? I can't believe you did it so fast! Like, you were amazing!"

*Amazing?* El glances up at him, eyes wide, and Mike suddenly looks alarmed.

"I mean, how fast you did it was amazing, not that you, personally, are amazing," he quickly amends, "Not that you're *not* amazing, though! You're pretty cool, I guess. I mean, you seem cool, I know we've never really talked before or anything, but maybe — "

"Mike!" Someone calls out.

El looks over to see Mike's friends waiting at the end of the hall, huddle by his locker. Mike looks relieved for the interruption and immediately stops babbling.

"Well, I gotta go," he instead says to El, giving her an apologetic look. "But maybe I'll see you later?"

"Yeah," El replies, trying not to sound too hopeful, and just like that, Mike is off.

*"Why were you walking with HER?"* El hears one of his friends — Dustin, she's pretty sure — ask before the boys submerge into the rushing crowd of Hawkins High students, out of earshot.

As Mike disappears from view, El is suddenly left wondering if that was the conclusion to their story. Was that the last time they'd ever speak to each other? The last time he'd ever acknowledge that she existed? What did '*maybe I'll see you later,*' mean, anyway?

El looks down at her hands. She knows she's different, powerful, *dangerous* — and yet, all she feels now is a delirious sort of weakness.

She's turning into such a knucklehead. A blushing, embarrassingly love-sick knucklehead.

*And yet...*

She doesn't completely hate it.

El crosses her fingers and desperately hopes that she won't become

invisible to him again.

### 3. Telephone

"Fireball the son of a bitch!" Dustin exclaims frantically.

"Hurry!" Mike pleads.

"Holy shit!" Lucas says through his teeth, gripping the edge of the table.

Will, hands shaking, drops his roll. The dice hit the Dungeons and Dragons board with a thud that resounds in the boys' ears.

There's a collective sharp intake of breath as the boys lean in, waiting for the dice to fall still.

"Wait for it..." Dustin says, holding up a hand.

And then...

"YES!" They all cheer, exchanging high-fives. Will breathes a sigh of relief, Lucas is grinning, Dustin fans himself with his hat, and Mike proceeds to pick up the Dungeon Master's manual.

"The Orc howls in pain!" Mike reads dramatically, adding a couple shrieks of pain for theatrics. "His body bursts into flames, leaving nothing but a blackened corpse behind!"

"Sweet," Dustin grins.

"Is that it?" Will asks, looking up at Mike expectantly.

"Silence falls over the dungeon," Mike continues to read, "You breathe a sigh of relief. It's finally over. Until—"

"Until?!" Lucas exclaims incredulously.

"Until you hear a noise. A faint, echoing rumble. It starts far away, but as your eyes widen in fear, you realize it's getting closer, bigger."

"Shit, shit, shit," Dustin wheezes.

"An army of Orcs storms the dungeon!" Mike declares, slamming a fist down on the table for emphasis. "There's *hundreds* and they're looking for vengeance, for *blood!*"

"Son of a bitch!" Dustin exclaims, throwing up his hands in defeat. "We're fu—"

He's cut off by the sound of the basement door swinging open. The boys look up from the gaming table to see Mrs. Wheeler descending the stairs. She glances around the basement, looking frustrated, to say the least.

"Michael?" She gripes, folding her arms across her chest. "What did we say about keeping things clean?"

"It is!" Mike insists.

His mother motions to the numerous empty pizza boxes and coca-cola cans scattered across the floor.

"Well, except for that stuff," Mike admits. "We just got distracted by the campaign!"

His mother gives him an impatient look before she begins to pick up the trash littered all over the floor. "You know that I'm not going to let you guys have sleepovers if you make a mess like this!"

"We know," Mike says flatly.

Mrs. Wheeler finishes stacking up the precarious assemble of pizza boxes and soda cans in her arms. "Next time, you're doing this," she reminds him.

"I know."

She glances at the game board, then back at the pajama-clad boys. "Have you guys been playing this all night?" She asks.

"Kinda..."

"Aren't you guys getting a little old for this game?"

The boys exchange irked frowns.

"There's no age limit for D&D," Mike insists, rolling his eyes. "I've seen like, 40-year-olds playing it."

"Well, that's comforting," Mrs. Wheeler replies dryly. She takes the pile of trash and heads back up the stairs. "Make sure you guys are in bed by 10!"

"But it's Friday!"

"10 o'clock," She repeats firmly, reaching the top of the stairs.

"Thanks, Karen!" Dustin calls out just as Mrs. Wheeler shuts the basement door.

"Dude!" Mike exclaims.

"What?"

"Don't call my mom 'Karen'!"

"She said I could!"

"When?"

"Last week!"

"Can we just get back to the campaign?" Lucas cuts in.

"Before we're completely destroyed by the Orcs?" Will adds.

"Fine," Mike sighs. He looks at the manual again and starts reading once more. He continues the narrative, setting the scene before listing off what scenarios the party could take.

Will, Lucas, and Dustin turn to each other, talking amongst themselves frantically.

"I say we fight our way out!" Lucas suggests.

"How are we going to fight hundreds of Orcs?" Will asks worriedly, "I think we should try to reason with them."

"You can't reason with bloodthirsty maniacs!" Dustin exclaims, "I say we offer one of ourselves as a sacrifice!"

"Who do we have to sacrifice?" Lucas asks, dumbfounded.

"The traitor," Dustin jokes, jabbing his thumb towards Mike.

Mike's brow furrows. "What?!"

"I'm *kidding!*" Dustin insists, before adding, "...Mostly."

"How am I a traitor?" Mike asks indignantly.

"Well," Dustin glances at Will and Lucas before continuing, "You kind of betrayed the party."

"How?!"

"You befriended the enemy!"

"What?!"

"El? El Hopper? You're like, totally in love with her!"

"Am not!"

"You literally walked her out of class!"

"I already told you guys, we just happened to be walking out at the same time. What was I supposed to do, just ignore her?"

"Uh, yeah!" Dustin says, tone indicating that Mike is missing blatantly obvious. "That's how we survive!"

"Survive? Survive what?"

"High school!"

"Don't you think you're being a little harsh?" Will cuts in hesitantly, "I mean, we don't really know them."

"*Thank you,*" Mike says to Will, giving Dustin an annoyed scowl.

"I'm not being harsh!" Dustin defends. "I'm just dealing with the facts! Everyone knows that high school has a hierarchy. You got your shithead jocks, the preps, the stoners, the punks, and then, *way* at the bottom, us. Face it, Mike — you and El are from two completely different classes!"

"No, we're not! We're in the same grade!"

"Not school 'classes'!" Dustin motions to the Dungeons and Dragons board. "Like these. When's the last time you heard of like, a High Elf befriending a Drow?"

"What?" Mike exclaims, furrowing his brow.

"Exactly, never!"

Mike, currently at a lost for words, just frowns. "Yeah, but..."

"We're just not meant to get along with people like El, it's not how high school works!" Dustin continues, "It'll only blow up in our faces and end in disaster!"

Mike falls silent. Dustin's words, though he probably doesn't know it, speak to a secret worry of Mike's: that El will grow bored of whatever is happening between them. That she'll wake up one day, remember how lame he is, and want nothing to do with him, like most kids at school. Is he really just wasting time, trying to get to know her? Maybe he's just prolonging his own rejection.

"He has a point," Lucas admits.

Mike isn't ready to admit as much. "I thought you liked Max!" He instead points out in frustration.

"I do—" Lucas pauses then freezes, eyes wide, "I mean, I *don't!* I mean, I dunno. She's still awesome, but I'm pretty sure she hates me."

"Why?" Will asks.

"Every time she passes me in the hallway, she punches me in the arm," Lucas explains, "It kind of hurts."

Dustin laughs. Lucas proceeds to punch his arm.

"That means she likes you," Will says, ignoring their fighting, "At least, I think so."

"How would that mean that she likes me?" Lucas asks, confused.

"She's showing you attention!" Will explains, "My mom says girls always go out of their way to show attention to the guys they like."

"Really?" Lucas perks up at this, failing to hide his growing smile.

Will shrugs.

"Like it matters!" Dustin scowls, "Did any of you guys hear a word of what I just said?"

"Haven't you ever heard that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover?" Mike counters Dustin, "What if Max and El are really awesome, and you're too busy being an asshole to even realize it?"

Dustin gives him a look. "I'll believe it when I see it. For now, I'm just trying to save us all from catastrophic embarrassment!"

Before anyone else can answer, Mike's mother opens the door to the basement again. "Michael!" She calls down, "Phone!"

"Who is it?" Mike calls back.

"It sounds like a girl!"

*Wait. What?*

"A girl?!" The guys all echo, turning to look at each other in bafflement.

A beat passes.

Then they're running.

The four boys, now shouting, scramble up the stairs with Mike in the lead.

"Maybe it's Vanna White!" Dustin exclaims, "Maybe you'll get to be on Wheel of Fortune!"

"Why would Vanna White call my house?" Mike snaps back.

"I dunno! But think about all the Atari games we could buy!"

"It's probably Mrs. Hawthorne!" Lucas snickers gleefully, "She's gonna bust you for stabbing the Biology frog in its gall bladder!"

"That was an accident!"

They reach the top of the stairs, race down the hallway, and arrive at the family phone. The receiver is still hanging off the cord where Mrs. Wheeler left it, swaying ominously.

As his friends scramble to stand behind him, Mike stares at the phone, suddenly feeling nervous.

"Are you gonna answer?" Will asks Mike.

Curiosity gets the better of Mike, and he nods in response. Glancing at his friends one last time, he takes a deep breath and picks up the phone, placing the receiver over his ear.

"...Hello?"

---

"This is the best part!" Max gushes excitedly, "Just wait for it!"

El watches in horror as the music swells and Michael Myers bursts from the shadows. He pins his victim to the wall by the neck, watching as his prey writhes in his grasp. Myes raises the knife. Its blade glints in the moonlight. Then, with a sickening *squelch*, the knife drives right through the victim's chest and into the wall.

"He gets PINNED to the wall with the KNIFE!" Max recounts, face twisted into a grossed-out smile. "It's totally disgusting and awesome!"

"Totally awesome," El nods, grimacing. She looks away from the screen and returns her attention to the task at hand: painting Max's

nails. "Hold still," she instructs, getting out the black polish.

"Sorry," Max apologizes, laying her fingers out in front of El.

"You like this?" El mumbles as the camera lingers on the limp body of the victim.

"It's cool!"

"Cool?"

"Totally."

They're in El's room, currently in the midst of one of their coveted Friday night sleepovers. They're sprawled across El's bed, surrounded by candy wrappers, nail polish bottles, and dark eyeshadow palettes. Max brought over her VHS copy of *Halloween*, which is currently playing on the small TV El keeps atop her dresser.

El gives the black nail polish a shake before unscrewing the cap. She carefully holds Max's palm with one hand as she applies the polish with the other, making sure to not get it all over Max's cuticles.

While El still has her hair slicked back, Max has pulled hers back into a long ponytail. She flips it over her shoulder as she speaks, making sure her hair is out of the way as El gets to work.

"You like the movie too, right?" Max asks, glancing back at the TV.

"Yeah," El lies. To be honest, after the frog dissection, the last thing El needed was an entire movie that was solely about someone going around and cutting people open. But El also knows that this is Max's favorite movie, and she doesn't want to hurt her feelings.

"I was Michael Myers for three Halloweens in a row," Max states proudly. "One time, I hid behind some bushes and totally scared the shit out of Billy. You should've heard him, he screamed like a—"

There's a knock on the door, and the girls look up to see El's father, aka, Jim Hopper, aka the Hawkins Chief of Police, standing in the doorway.

El knows that, like her, her dad can be pretty intimidating. He's tall and massive and can yell when he needs to. But tonight, he's not a tough police officer. Tonight, he's just her dad, sporting an old Hawkins University T-shirt and some jeans.

"You kids still doing alright in here?" He asks, glancing into the room. His eyes land on the TV, catching sight of Michael Myers stalking down a dark hallway, knife in hand. He frowns. "What are you watching?"

"Nothing!" El quickly replies. With a quick jerk of her head, the TV switches off, and she turns to smile at her father innocently. "Just sitting!"

"And doing nails!" Max adds, holding up her hands as evidence.

"Humph," Hopper snorts, evidently deciding to let it slide. "Well, are you girls getting hungry? You want me to order a pizza, or something?"

"Yes, please!" El chirps.

"Can we have sausage and pepperoni?" Max asks.

"Sure," Hopper replies.

The girls wait for him to leave before turning back to each other. El keeps the TV turned off, hoping that she can get away with 'forgetting' to play the movie again.

"Are you going to go to Homecoming?" El asks, trying to distract Max with conversation.

"You mean the dance?"

"Yeah."

"The dance that they've put up ten million posters for all over school?"

"Yeah."

"The one at the end of the month?"

"Yeah."

"The dance that only dweebs go to?"

"Yeah?"

"Then no."

El pushes down the tinge of disappointment that rises in her chest.

"Yeah, me neither. It's lame."

"Totally."

El finishes Max's nails, and Max admires them proudly. "Thanks!"

Max smiles, proceeding to blow on them to help them dry faster.

"Welcome," El replies, pushing the nail polish bottles aside.

A moment passes, and El starts to search her mind for something to say. She really, *really*, doesn't want to finish watching the movie. Thankfully, Max speaks up next.

"We should do something!" Max says, looking around El's room.

"Like what?"

*Please not 'watch Halloween'.*

Max thinks. "What do girls do at sleepovers? Like, the preps?"

El's brow furrows. "I don't know. Gossip?"

"Listen to Cyndi Lauper?"

El blushes. "Talk about guys."

"And," Max says slowly, pausing for dramatic emphasis, "Pillow fights!" She turns, grabs a pillow from El's bedspread, and proceeds to smack El over the head with it.

"Ow!" El laughs, grabbing her own pillow.

The two go back and forth, whacking at each other sporadically as they burst into fits of uncontrollable laughter.

Amongst the chaos, Max knocks the remainder of El's pillows off the bed, uncovering something that was hidden underneath.

The Hawkins High 1984 yearbook slides out into view. It bumps up against Max's leg and makes her pause. "What the—"

"Don't!" El gasps, dropping the pillow she was holding.

Max snatches up the book before El can. She turns it over in her hands before holding it up to El, an intrigued grin curving her lips.

"Why do you keep last year's yearbook under your pillow?" Max asks incredulously.

"It's nothing!"

"Nothing? Seriously?"

"Just give it to me!" El snaps, lunging forward.

"What are you hiding?" Max moves back and gets off the bed, holding the yearbook closer. Ignoring El's protests, she starts to flip through it, looking completely pleased with herself. "Wait, is this page bookmarked?" She asks, flipping open to the page marked with a yellow post-it note.

"*Max!*" El scrambles off the bed and follows after her, but Max is too quick. She continues to move about the room, maneuvering just out of El's reach.

"Why do you have this page bookmarked?" She asks, scanning the page, "It's just the last of the kids from our grade, no one we even know is — holy shit."

El freezes. "What?"

Max turns the book around and points at the page. "That's that guy!" She exclaims, "Mike! Mike Wheeler! The geek! The one you were totally drooling over last week!"

"No!" El denies adamantly, her cheeks growing hot.

"You even got his dorky club photo bookmarked," Max snorts, flipping to the second sticky-noted page. "You're like, totally stalking him."

El uses her powers to whisk the book out of Max's hands and into her own grasp.

"Stop." She says firmly, giving Max her best glare.

Max looks alarmed, but then her expression softens. "El..."

El tries to stay mad, to stay *tough*, but her embarrassment eats away at her and she can feel her walls start to break.

She looks at her feet, face hot with shame. "*Don't*," she warns, pleads. "I...I know it's stupid. *I'm* stupid."

"You're not stupid!" Max quickly insists. She moves to sit on the bed again and motions for El to join her.

El, still clutching the yearbook, follows her with great reluctance.

Max turns to look her in the eye, speaking with great sincerity. "I'm sorry I laughed, okay? I just didn't think you'd ever like someone so —"

El eyes her warily.

"Different," Max hastily finishes.

El slumps her shoulders as she looks down at the yearbook in her arms. She runs a finger over its spine, thoughts going back to her few, but treasured, memories of Mike. The way he made her laugh. The way he rambled when he got excited. The way he wasn't totally scared off by her smudged eyeshadow or dark demeanor. The way he smiled at her.

"He's nice," El finally mumbles, "and smart. And funny. He doesn't make fun of me for being weird."

Max stays silent, allowing El to unload all of her emotions.

"I know you think he's a geek, but I...I like him," El continues, feeling less shy, "Just 'cause he likes comics and video games doesn't mean that he's a total knucklehead."

"Right," Max replies, looking oddly uncomfortable for a moment. But the moment passes as quickly as it comes, and a second later, her face returns to its original, relaxed expression. "No, you're totally right. I shouldn't have laughed, that was stupid."

"It's ok," El assures her with a small smile. She turns, grabs her pillows off the floor, and arranges them as they once were, sliding the yearbook back under her them. Though the anxious feeling in her chest has died down, she's still feeling a little awkward about the whole thing. She'd never planned on having to explain why she spends too much time looking at someone in a photograph, even if it was to her best friend.

"So, what are you gonna do?" Max asks.

"Do?"

"About President Nerd?"

*Oh. Right.*

El looks down at her own nails, gaze focused on the chipped black polish on her thumbnail. "I don't know. He barely notices me," She mumbles.

"Why don't you just show him one of your mind tricks, or something?" Max suggests. "That'll get his attention."

El gives her a look. "You know I can't. Dad doesn't want me to tell anyone about my powers."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. It was just an idea."

"And," El continues, "I don't want him to think I'm a freak."

"Why would he think that?"

El holds up her hands, then motions to her own head.

"Having powers makes you cool!" Max says. "You know what I'd do if I had powers?"

"Something dangerous?" El smiles.

"Uh, yeah!"

The two exchange smiles before falling silent.

A beat passes, then Max gets a mischievous grin on her face. It's the same grin she had before they spray-painted the principal's car.

*Oh no.*

"What?" El asks hesitantly.

"It's just," Max replies, grinning even wider, "If he won't notice you, you just gotta make him."

El frowns. "What do you mean?"

Max turns around, grabs the phone resting on El's nightstand, and pulls it onto her bed. "Call him!"

"No!" El jumps back from the phone as quickly as if it had burned her.

"C'mon!" Max taunts, holding out the receiver, "I dare you!"

"We already played Truth or Dare."

"Well, we're playing again. Call him."

El continues to shake her head, though with a bit of reluctance. "I don't...I don't know his number," she mumbles weakly.

"Yellow Pages," Max replies.

"But..."

"Do you want him to know you exist, or not?" Max says

exasperatedly, "Are you really going to just keep moping around like a total bonehead or actually do something?"

El looks her in the eye.

Max looks back.

"I'm not a bonehead."

"Then call him."

El takes a deep breath.

"You know you want to," Max says in an exaggerated, girly voice that makes El giggle.

"Fine!" She bursts.

"Yes! No takebacks!" Max laughs impishly before jumping off the bed.  
"I'll go get the book!"

El buries her face in her pillow as Max runs out of her room and down the stairs.

*What on earth did she just agree to?*

Much too soon, Max is back with the bulky Yellow Pages book. She rejoins El on the bed and begins to flip through the "W" Residencies. Her eyes are narrowed with determination, while El's are wide with anticipation.

"Wheeler!" Max announces triumphantly, jabbing a finger at the page.  
"Ted and Karen. That's gotta be it!"

"O-okay!" El says, unable to hide her nervousness — she doesn't think she'd be able to even if she tried.

El pulls the phone closer to her. Max reads off the number. El dials it with shaking fingers.

Max slides in close to El, no doubt to make sure she can hear the entire exchange take place. El holds the receiver to her ear, holding

her breath, heart pounding.

The phone rings three times before it's picked up.

"Hello?" Someone answers — someone that's definitely not Mike. It's a woman's voice, probably his *mom's*.

This was a terrible mistake.

"Uh, hi?" El's voice is shaking, and she takes another deep breath to steady herself. "Is Mike there?"

"Yes, he is. May I ask who's calling?"

El hesitates, not wanting to out herself just yet. "I'm in class with him," she offers instead. "At school."

"Alright, I'll go get him," Mrs. Wheeler replies. El can hear her set the phone down.

"Was that his MOM?" Max snorts.

El nods. "She's going to get him." She can feel her heartbeat in her throat and she suddenly feels nauseous. "What should I say to him?" She hisses to Max.

"Tell him you love him!" Max replies, snorting again.

El punches her leg.

There's a minute of silence. Then, moments later, El hears the muffled sound of running feet and shouting. Her brow furrows in alarm and confusion, but seconds later, it's quiet again.

More silence.

Then she hears someone pick up the phone.

El readies herself.

*Here we go.*

---

"...Hello?" Mike asks nervously.

El swallows. "Hey."

Both receivers crackle loudly, allowing for Mike and El's friends to hear every exchanged word.

"Who is this?"

("The girl of your dreams," Max says in that girly voice again, unable to keep a straight face.)

".....El."

"*El?*"

(Will's jaw drops. Dustin and Lucas immediately proceed to make an '*oooooooooh,*' sound.)

"Uh, yeah."

Mike's heart skips a beat, and for a moment, he's pretty sure he's dreaming. Then again, if he is, he's 100% sure that his dreams wouldn't include Lucas and Dustin making kissy sounds in the background. "Hey!" He replies, throwing the guys a dirty look. "What's up?"

El pauses. She still doesn't have a good reason for calling him. She glances around her room, desperately searching for some sort of inspiration. Her gaze lands on her backpack, and she smiles in relief.

"Do we have homework?" She asks quickly, "In Biology? I, uh, forgot."

("*Homework?*" Max mouths, shaking her head in disbelief.)

"Homework?" *Was that it?* Mike feels his heart sink a little lower in his chest. "I don't think so."

"Oh," El replies. Why did she call him again? She sounds like a complete idiot right now. How is this supposed to make him like her?

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

("This is the most depressing conversation I've ever heard," Lucas mutters, "And we just had to watch *Scared Straight* for psychology class.")

"So, uh, what are you up to?" Mike asks, trying to make conversation.

El feels herself blush. "I'm just at my house," she mumbles.

"Cool! I'm at my house too!" Mike responds earnestly.

("No shit," Dustin says, smacking himself on the forehead.)

Even though this conversation is going about as well as a train wreck, El smiles when she hears the familiar, upbeat liveliness in his voice. "Comics and video games?" She asks, hoping he'll remember their detention conversation.

Mike grins. She'd remembered! "Uh, yeah, kind of! I actually just got this new Star Wars Comic, First Strike? It's the 100th issue, so it's like, super cool!"

"One hundred?" El echoes in surprise.

"Yeah, they make a lot," Mike continues, "I've read all of them though. You could borrow them sometime, if you wanted."

("Do you think that showing you his comic collection is the nerd version of getting to first base?" Max asks.)

El feels her face grow warm. "Yeah," she says casually, even though she's never seen any of the Star Wars movies. She's not about to admit that right now, though.

"Cool!" Mike replies cheerily.

El wants to say more. She wants to just sit and talk to Mike for hours upon hours until her voice is hoarse and she's exhausted her vocabulary. But with Max right there, grinning at her, and the mounting feeling of pressure swelling in her chest, El knows that she needs to take a step back.

"Well, uh, I should go," she says.

Mike feels his heart sink. Then again, as he scowls at Dustin and Lucas, who are back to making kissy faces at him, now isn't exactly the best time to get into a lengthy conversation with El.

"Yeah, okay," Mike replies. "See you later!"

"Okay!"

"Bye!"

"Bye, Mike!"

The phone call ends.

---

"You guys are assholes!" Mike says as he hangs up the phone.

In response, his friends all burst into laughter.

"That was painful!" Lucas exclaims, both grinning and wincing at the same time.

"Like watching C3PO trying to win over Leia!" Dustin giggles.

"Oh, c'mon! Was it really that bad?" Mike asks, turning to Will. Though he keeps his tone casual, internally he's pleading for validation that he didn't just totally screw up.

"I think she likes you," Will offers with a smile, "She's showing you attention, remember?"

Mike hesitates. "But she just wanted to know about homework!"

"She could have called the teacher," Will points out, "Or someone else in class."

"That's true..."

"You want my advice?" Dustin asks.

"Not really," Mike mutters.

"Get out while you still can," Dustin finishes, placing a hand on Mike's shoulder.

"Gee, thanks."

"You're welcome!"

"C'mon!" Lucas rolls his eyes and starts heading back down the hallway. "Let's get back to the campaign!"

"Last one to the basement gets sacrificed!" Dustin calls out, darting past them.

"No fair!" Will cries out, following after them.

As they're already halfway down the basement stairs, Mike already knows that he's going to be the one to get sacrificed.

Shit.

Glancing at the phone one last time, Mike follows his friends down the stairs, forcing himself to push aside any further worries about El.

---

El hangs up the phone quickly, cheeks a bright scarlet.

Max starts laughing again, though this time it doesn't hurt El's feelings. "He's like, totally in love with you," Max snorts, "It's adorable, really."

El tries her best to give Max an annoyed look, but truth be told, the phone conversation has left her head in the clouds. "He doesn't," El insists half-heartedly.

"Right, Mr. 'I'm At My House Too'!" Max bursts into another round of laughter. "Let me show you my sweet comics!"

El, despite how red-faced she already is, manages to blush even more. "Shut up!" She replies, now laughing too.

"You like him," Max teases, poking El repeatedly.

"Stop!" El gasps, trying to grab the offending finger.

"You like Mike!"

"Mike?" A new voice asks.

The girls look up to see Hopper standing in the doorway, holding a box of pizza.

"Dad!" El squeaks. She and Max sit up straighter on her bed, trying to look as nonchalant as possible.

"Who's Mike?" Hopper asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Nobody."

"Nobody?"

"Yeah."

"So you're just getting all giggly over 'nobody'?"

El hesitates. "I...."

"Mike is a boy from school," Max cuts in.

El turns to her friend, aghast. "*Max!*"

"What?" Max shrugs, "He's a cop! He was going to find out eventually!"

"So, you tell him *now?*"

"Do I know him?" Hopper asks. He's smiling, eyes twinkling with mischief. "This 'Mike'?"

"No!" El exclaims. This, without a doubt, is the most embarrassing night of her life.

"What's he do?" Hopper continues, looking intrigued. "Any sports or clubs?"

"Well, he's 15, so he sells drugs," Max says dryly, "Like, hardcore

drugs. And he's been to jail, like five times."

"MAX."

Hopper snorts at the sarcasm. He sets the pizza down on El's bed and points to Max. "I like her," he states.

"I don't," El grumbles, throwing Max a dirty look.

Max beams back at her.

"I going to assume you're joking," Hopper says, giving the girls a serious look, to which Max nods sincerely.

"Do you actually think El would like someone like that?" Max asks.

Hopper hesitates. "Well..."

El's brow furrows. "Dad!"

"Well, I know you two are into this whole," his sentence trails off as he motions between them, "Punk thing. I'm fine with it, but I want you to be smart about it. Like, the whole thing with the principal's car? You gotta stop messing around like that."

"I know," El pouts. Even though her dad already chewed her out about this last week, it still hurts to know that she disappointed him. "Sorry."

Hopper smooths his hand over El's slicked-back hair. "You guys are good kids," he reminds them, "I know high school isn't always easy, but you don't need to act out to make it easier."

Max and El exchange hesitant looks.

"Ok," El mumbles.

Hopper nods before moving back and heading back towards the door. "Make sure you get some sleep," he instructs them.

"We will!" Max assures him.

Hopper leaves then, shutting El's bedroom door behind him.

"Your dad is pretty cool, you know," Max says. She opens the pizza box and takes a slice, proceeding to talk with her mouth full. "Like Jack Cates. I wish my dad was a cop."

"You say that now," El takes her own pizza slice. "But what about when you want to spend time with Lucas?"

Max nearly chokes on her pizza slice. "What?!"

El raises her eyebrows and takes a bite of her pizza.

"I don't like that dweeb!" Max insists.

"Okay."

"I don't!"

"You were staring at him during lunch yesterday."

"He had food on his face, it was hilarious."

"Okay."

"I don't like Lucas," Max repeats. She rolls her eyes, flips her ponytail, shifts in place, and makes a snort of disgust, as if the more dismissive actions she makes, the more El will believe her.

"Sure."

Max gives her a dirty look.

El only beams right back.

## **4. MadMax**

It's the last Sunday of September. With October just around the corner, the leaves have already begun to turn, transforming Hawkins into a mosaic of orange and red hues. The Indian summer heat has faded away, leaving behind the faint but telltale chill of the season to come.

As Mike waits in the driveway outside Lucas' house, seated on his bike, he shuffles side-to-side, trying to keep warm. He checks his watch. 11:17 AM. Lucas was supposed to meet him out here 2 minutes ago.

Mike sighs but keeps waiting. Another 3 minutes pass, then another 5, and by 11:26, Mike is about to approach the front door and knock when Lucas emerges, looking thoroughly pissed off.

Mike's brow furrows. "What happened to you?"

"Erica hid my money!" Lucas fumes. His bike is leaning on the side of his house and he grabs it. He walks it closer to Mike before throwing his leg over the seat and mounting it.

"Why?"

"Because she's evil!"

"Where'd you find it?"

"It was hidden with her old Barbies!"

"What?!"

"I know!"

"That sucks. Is she gonna get in trouble?"

"Probably not," Lucas answers with an eye-roll. "Let's just go."

Mike nods and the two bike off down the road, headed to their favorite Sunday afternoon destination: the Palace Arcade.

They only bike a couple feet before Lucas' notices the obvious: two members of their party are missing. "Where's Will and Dustin?" He asks, glancing at Mike.

Mike thinks back to the telephone calls he'd had to make this morning. "They can't come — Will is spending the day with his mom and brother," he recounts, "And Dustin's cat got sick, so he and his mom are taking it to the vet."

"Mews is like, a million years old," Lucas says with a shake of his head. "How is she even still alive?"

"Maybe she's an immortalist," Mike jokes, causing Lucas to snort.

The two bike towards the downtown area. On the way there, they pass by the high school football field, where the football team is in the midst of practicing for the big homecoming football game. The frenzied shouts of the coach are still audible over the soft bustle of distant passing cars, echoing bird calls, and the crunch of dead leaves under their bike wheels.

Mike's father has always wanted him to do sports, but Mike can't honestly think of anything worse than having to waste a Sunday getting yelled at and throwing around a ball in the cold.

Lucas sees the football players too, and he turns to glance at Mike with a curious look on his face.

"Are we going to Homecoming this year?" Lucas asks. "The dance, I mean, not the game."

Last year, the boys had skipped the big annual fall dance. Still adjusting to being in high school, they hadn't quite found their footing yet. A mushy, romantic school dance hadn't appealed to them, so they'd gone to see *Terminator* instead.

But this year...

"Maybe," Mike says. "Why, do you want to?"

"I dunno," Lucas replies guardedly, "Do you?"

Mike bites down on his lower lip, stopping himself from saying something that'll only embarrass him. Like, something about how he's actually been thinking about Homecoming a lot lately. Or how, sometimes, when he's trying to fall asleep, he'll run over scenarios in his mind. How those scenarios are often focused on one person, one moment, one *question*.

The scenarios always end in frustration because Mike knows it's all pointless, anyway. He barely knows El, and El hardly knows him. Even if they were closer, what's to say that a cool girl like her would agree to go with a nobody like him? What if she wanted to go with someone else?

The thought jabs at Mike with a stabbing pain as an unsettling question dawns on him.

*Does El have a boyfriend?*

It's something he's never considered before. He's only ever seen her hanging around with Max, but what if her boyfriend like, went to another school, or something? He'd probably be someone totally bad ass, with like, a motorcycle. Someone who got detention for worse things than selling their test answers.

Mike feels an uncomfortable amount of jealousy churn in his chest, which is ridiculous because, as far as he knows, the person whom he was currently jealous of might not even exist.

"Mike?" Lucas asks, glancing at him. "You okay?"

"Uh, yeah!" Mike responds quickly, shaking his head as he comes back to. "I dunno about Homecoming. We still have a month to decide."

"Yeah," Lucas agrees somberly.

They don't speak much after that, not until they arrive at the arcade. Their legs are sore from biking — both wince slightly as they dismount the bikes that are getting slightly too small for them.

"I can't wait until we can drive," Lucas laments as the two park their bikes at the bike rack.

Mike, thinking back to El's motorcycle-driving boyfriend who may or may not exist, agrees wholeheartedly. "Totally. We're all still taking driver's ed together next summer, right?"

"Definitely!" Lucas nods. "It'll be better that way."

Because everything's better when they're all together. Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will. It's been that way ever since kindergarten, just the four of them. But now that they're in high school, things are changing. Mike thinks about how tense things have been with Dustin lately and can't help but worry.

"Hey, Lucas?" Mike asks as he and Lucas head towards the entrance of the Palace Arcade.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Dustin is seriously pissed at me?"

"What?"

"You know," Mike hesitates, "About talking to El."

"Even if he is, that's his problem," Lucas reminds him. "I think he's just weirded out by the whole thing, so he's acting like a shithead about it. He'll get over it."

"Yeah," Mike replies, sincerely hoping that Lucas is right.

They enter the arcade, instantly feeling welcomed by the flickering neon blue lights, the sounds of 8-bit chiptunes, and the smell of old quarters.

"Let's start with *Galaga* first!" Mike suggests, and Lucas agrees.

The two head over to the game console. Lucas benevolently allows Mike to go first, and so he does, cracking his fingers before he begins.

Even though the rest of Mike's life has been kinda weird lately, there's something comforting about just getting to push it all aside and focus on the simple task of shooting up some aliens. It's familiar, it's easy, it makes sense, and he knows exactly what to do about it all.

Unfortunately, Mike's mindless daze doesn't last long, as Lucas finds a way to bring a certain someone back into their dialogue.

"So, are you going to keep talking to El?" Lucas asks conversationally.

Mike flinches, almost missing the alien he's trying to shoot at. "I dunno," he says, trying to sound like the idea of spending time with El isn't something he's secretly dying to happen, "Maybe. I mean, if she wanted to. Are you going to keep talking to Max?"

Lucas smiles a little and shakes his head. "I think if I tried, I'd end up in the hospital," he jokes, rubbing at his arm.

Mike makes a dismissive sort of sound. "Does it actually bother you? All the punching?" He glances at Lucas just in time to see him blush.

"Not completely," Lucas admits.

Mike gives a snort of a laugh as he finishes his round of *Galaga*. "400,000!" He boasts, turning to Lucas. "I think that means I beat Dustin for first place!"

"Think again!" Lucas says, shaking his head.

Mike's brow furrows in confusion, but sure enough, when he turns to look at the final scoreboard, he's only won second place. Ranking in at first with 450,000 points is someone unknown to the boys: *MadMax*

"What the hell?" Mike exclaims, dumbfounded, "Who's *MadMax*?"

"I think I recognize them," Lucas frowns. He examines the screen closely, as if the secret identity of their competitor could be found hidden amongst the pixels. "I've seen that username on the leaderboards of other games here, but not this high!"

"Dustin's gonna be pissed," Mike says, trying to hide that he too is upset about the current turn of events, "He's all the way in third place now!"

"This has to be recent! We were at the arcade Friday before we went back to your house. Dustin still had the high score then."

"You're right."

The boys fall silent for a moment, both staring at the screen with puzzled frowns.

"We gotta find out who MadMax is," Lucas finally says, "Maybe he can tell us how he got such a high score!"

"Good idea!" Mike agrees.

The two begin their search, going from arcade game to arcade game, checking out the leaderboard screens to see if MadMax played there. Sure enough, they stumble upon a trail of high scores that lead them towards the back of the arcade.

They scan the sea of game consoles before their gaze lands on *Dig-Dug*. There's a lone figure hunched over the console, sporting a baggy gray hoodie and washed-out jeans. The spritely sound effects of the game are going off like crazy as the player's score climbs higher and higher. Pale fingers move at lightning speed, flying over the controls in a determined focus.

"That's gotta be him," Mike whispers, to which Lucas nods. "Look at how fast he's going!"

"Should we go over?" Lucas asks.

Mike shrugs. "Sure."

The two approach the figure cautiously, not wanting to disturb the powerful gaming performance happening before their eyes.

When the final score tops out at 751,300, the boys are shocked, to say the least.

"Holy shit!" Lucas hisses, turning to glance at Mike, wide-eyed.

Mike only nods back, feeling just as awed. He clears his throat before stepping forward and giving the hoodied figure a nudge on the shoulder. "Hey!" He says with a friendly tone, "Are you Mad Max? 'Cause you're like, really good!"

The figure flinches, as if Mike had startled them, but doesn't turn to look at them.

"We were just wondering if you could tell us how you get all these high scores," Lucas adds hopefully, "I've never seen someone get more than 700,000 on *Dig-Dug*!"

The figure mutters something unintelligible in response.

Mike frowns. "What?" He asks, stepping closer.

Another mutter.

"Huh?"

With a frustrated huff, the hoodied individual turns to face them. At the same time, Mike and Lucas' jaws nearly drop to the floor.

They almost don't recognize her. Her black eyeshadow is gone, leaving her face looking almost ghostly in comparison. Her long, often tangled hair is pulled back into a tight ponytail that's hidden by her hood.

Despite the costume change, Mike and Lucas still realize that they're currently face-to-face with none other than Max Mayfield.

Max Mayfield, a habitual visitor of the principal's office.

Max Mayfield, who liked wearing leather jackets and ripped jeans.

Max Mayfield, who skateboarded to school every day.

Max Mayfield, who, a little over a week ago, had called them all 'literal losers' and 'full-on geeks.'

Mike can't help it. The irony of the whole situation is extremely amusing to him. He bursts out laughing, even though it instantly causes Max to give him a death glare.

"*Max?!*" Lucas manages to choke out, still looking shocked, "*You're Mad Max?!*"

Max, still glaring, crosses her arms over her chest. "So what if I am?" She asks threateningly.

Mike manages to control his laughter, though only barely. "It's just," He finally replies, "I don't think we would have ever thought *you'd* be here."

"We didn't know you liked video games!" Lucas adds, completely in awe. "Or that you were amazing at them!"

Max shifts in place uncomfortably. "It's no big deal," she mutters, though Mike can't help but notice the small smile she's failing to hide.

"It is!" Lucas insists, practically drooling now, "You beat Dustin's high score on *Galaga*, he's been number one since middle school!"

Max smirks. "Seriously? It wasn't even hard."

While Lucas continues to adoringly gaze at Max, Mike can't help but glance around the arcade. If Max is here, then her best friend can't be that far behind, right?

"Is El with you?" Mike asks Max casually (hopefully).

"No!" Max answers brashly, brow furrowing, "She can't know about this!"

Mike feels his heart sink a little, but he brushes it off. Meanwhile, Lucas is looking confused over Max's response.

Lucas eyes her. "You mean, you haven't told her?"

"I can't!" Max says desperately, "I don't want her to think I'm a geek like you guys," she pauses, then adds, "No offense."

"Thanks," Mike replies flatly.

"Look," Max continues. She steps closer to them, keeping her voice low. "I have to work really hard to keep up my reputation around school. Do you know how much my life would suck if people like Troy found out that I like nerdy stuff like this? I'd be totally screwed. No one would take me seriously."

"Still!" Mike counters, "Even if that's true, you shouldn't lie to El. She's your friend, isn't she?"

"Obviously."

"Well, friends don't keep secrets from each other. And I doubt El would make fun of you for doing something that you like."

Max eyes him carefully, scrutinizing his response.

"She didn't make fun of me for liking this kind of stuff," Mike reminds her.

"Yeah, but that's only because she—" Max stops mid-sentence and shakes her head. "Never mind."

"You should be proud!" Lucas tells her, butting in before Mike can pry about what Max had left unsaid. "You have crazy good skills! You should tell her!"

Max sighs, looking both frustrated and conflicted. Her eyes roll up to the ceiling and stay there for a moment. "Fine!" She finally replies, looking back at the guys, "*Maybe* I'll tell her. But only her. If this gets out to anyone—"

"It won't!" Lucas assures her, smiling. "I swear! We're *really* good at keeping secrets!"

Mike can't help but side-eye Lucas. If Dustin had thought that Mike was totally in love with El (which he WASN'T, just for the record), he would only need to look at Lucas right now — all smiles and bright-eyes and blushing cheeks.

Max eyes both of them but nods, her worries seemingly appeased for the time being. "Good," she states, uncrossing her arms and putting them in her pockets.

There's a beat of silence between the trio, all unsure of what to do next.

Thankfully, Lucas speaks up again with a tentative offer. "Well, uh, if you want, we could, like...uh, play together? Maybe you could...uh..."

show us how you got...uh...your high, uh, score?"

Mike is certain that he's never heard anyone use "uh" more in a sentence before. Nevertheless, he knows how much this would mean to Lucas, as much as Lucas may try to deny it.

"Yeah!" Mike says, rushing to Lucas' aid. "We could do *Defender* or *Dragon's Lair* — we're both really good at those."

"I don't think so," Max says, shaking her head dismissively. "I've already been here all morning. I got places to be."

She looks nervous, and at first it confuses Mike, but then he realizes that Max Mayfield is *blushing*. Why? Was she *shy*? Could it actually be because of Lucas? Maybe Will's theory was actually right...

"Oh," Lucas replies, looking a little dejected.

"Thanks anyway, though," Max adds, sounding sincere.

"You're welcome!" Lucas replies with more enthusiasm. "We're gonna be here all day, if you, uh, wanna come back."

"You seriously play here all day?" Max questions, a small smirk on her face.

Lucas hesitates. "...Yes?"

"You guys are such nerds," Max says with an eye-roll, though her tone is light-hearted.

"Well, you kind of are, too," Lucas points out, "I mean —" His sentence trails off as he motions to the arcade.

Max blushes more now, and it's such an uncharacteristic look for her that Mike is completely taken aback to see it.

"Whatever," Max replies, pulling her hood lower over her face. She grabs her skateboard, which has been resting against the *Dig-Dug* console this entire time, and turns to leave.

"See ya' around, dweebs," She says, punching Lucas in the arm as she

walks past.

"Bye!" Lucas replies eagerly, waving to her as she leaves.

Mike can't help but smile at Lucas, and it isn't until Max walks out the front doors of the arcade that Lucas even notices.

"What?" He asks, looking at Mike defensively.

"Nothing!" Mike replies, still grinning.

"Mike, seriously," Lucas complains, giving him a look.

"It's seriously nothing," Mike insists, then, unable to help himself, lightly punches Lucas in the arm, "*Dweeb*."

Lucas blushes again. His gaze moves back to the *Dig-Dug* high score screen, and he sighs wistfully. "She's so cool."

"You should ask her to Homecoming," Mike says sincerely.

Lucas eyes him. "I'll ask Max to Homecoming when you ask El," He replies dryly.

It's Mike's turn to blush now. "What!?"

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"Face it, Mike, even though he's an idiot sometimes, Dustin has a point. Girls like that aren't into guys like us."

"You don't know that!" Mike insists, "Anything could happen!"

"Just because it *could* doesn't mean it *will*."

"Doesn't mean that it *won't*."

Lucas still looks unsure, but he sighs again, seemingly compliant. "I guess. I just don't wanna get my hopes up, you know?"

He definitely knows. As supportive as Mike wants to be, he knows

deep down that, if the tables were turned, the same sentiments wouldn't improve how he felt about his current status with El. Still, Mike doesn't want to dwell on his insecurities for too long, that'll only make things worse.

"Hey," he says instead, giving Lucas a light nudge, "Why don't we try to beat Max's score on *Dig-Dug*?"

Lucas looks at him, stunned. "Are you serious? That's going to be *impossible*."

"Yeah, but imagine how impressed she'd be," Mike pauses before adding, "Or pissed. She might get mad. But even then, she'll have to come back and play again to beat you. You'd get to see her, probably even talk to her."

Lucas thinks about this for a moment, a hesitant smile growing on his face. "Do you think that'd actually work?"

Mike shrugs. "Why not?"

And that's how, 35 quarters and 2 hours later, Lucas gets the high score of 752,001 on *Dig-Dug*. Mike cheers him on the whole time, and when Lucas enters his name into the leaderboard, seeing it beside Max's just feels right.

## 5. Monday Morning

It's Monday morning and El Hopper has overslept.

She didn't mean to, she really didn't, but her bed had felt so warm, and her sheets were so soft, and it'd only taken a small tilt of her head to turn her alarm clock off...

Next thing she knows, her dad's shaking her out of bed, informing her that she's 'Missed the School Bus' and that she needs to get up 'Right Now' because this is 'Very Serious.'

El doesn't need to be told twice. She scrambles out of bed, yanks on the first black pants and distressed denim jacket she can find, and hastily does her hair and makeup.

Hopper waits for her by the front door, holding a coffee thermos in one hand. He's fully suited up in his police uniform, which always makes him more intimidating than usual.

"You ready kid?" He calls out. "I'm gonna drive you."

"Ready!" El replies back, darting over to join him. She flicks her hand and summons her shoes and coat towards herself, hopping in place as she hastily puts them on.

"Done!" She pants, looking up at Hopper fervently.

"Alright, c'mon." Hopper gives her a small smile, ruffles her hair, and leads her outside to his cruiser. They board the car and take off, headed towards Hawkins High at a higher speed than usual.

"You're speeding," El comments, eyeing the climbing speedometer.

"I'm the sheriff," Hopper replies. "I'm allowed to speed."

El eyes him. "You're allowed to break the laws?"

Hopper hesitates.

"You gotta stop messing around like that," El says gruffly, mimicking

what he'd told her Friday night.

Hopper snorts through his nose, as he often does when El mimics him. "Fine," he gives in, easing off the gas.

El relaxes back in her seat. The car's clock reads 7:55, reminding her that she only has 5 minutes before class starts. Maybe she shouldn't have chided her Dad for speeding, after all...

She bites her lower lip anxiously, something Hopper spots. To help calm her nerves, he turns on the radio.

The comforting sound of classic rock fills their ears. It's playing The Clash — one of their songs that El has grown up with, a song that brings her right back to her childhood.

It triggers a memory that flashes through her mind, and as soon as it hits, El can't stop it. It whirrs to life like an old film reel, flickering vividly.

A Monday morning. She was still young, no more than 6 or 7.

The radio was playing in the kitchen. El was seated at the table, drawing with her crayons and trying her best to sing along, though she butchered most of the words — lyrics like *police and thieves in the streets* became 'police and teethes in their seats.'

Hopper was making some toaster waffles for her breakfast. "You like this song?" He asked, smiling at her.

"Mmm hmm!" El nodded eagerly.

Hopper snorted. "You're gonna grow up to be a little punk rocker, you know that?"

"Mmm hmm!"

The waffles finished and Hopper plated them onto an orange-colored dish.

"Here you go," He said, walking to the table and passing her the plate.

"Thank you!" El accepted the waffles eagerly, munching away as Hopper got his keys, thermos, and jacket.

"I'll be back tonight," Hopper said once he'd finished, slipping his sheriff's hat on. "Then we can work on your school lessons."

As El was still in hiding at this time, she was forced into homeschooling via Hopper. He did the best he could, but that didn't stop El from wanting to be taught like everyone else.

"Papa?" She asked, stopping him before he could walk out the door.

"Yeah?"

"When can I go to real school?"

"Soon."

"When is soon?"

"When it's safe."

"When will it be safe?"

"When there's no more bad men."

El frowned. "I thought we left the bad men in Chicago."

"We did," Hopper admitted, "But they could still come back. We've gotta be careful. I don't want you getting hurt, understand?"

"Understand," El echoed, even though she didn't.

She hadn't then, but she does now.

The memory fades to black and suddenly El is back in the passenger's seat of her dad's car. She glances down at her hands, feeling slightly rattled.

She and Hopper don't talk about their past much, not that El even remembers most of it. Her early childhood is largely a haze of senses and emotions, not concrete memories. The moments that she can vividly remember all happened after the bad men, after Hopper

brought her to Hawkins.

From what she knows about her early life, it's probably better this way.

El doesn't like to reflect on the darker aspects of her life, but the memories have a nasty tendency to sneak up on her when she least expects it. Like right now, for instance.

Thankfully, none of it matters anymore. Things are different now. Everything that happened in Chicago, the laboratory...it's all gone.

El gets to be a normal kid, so long as she keeps her powers under control. And, like a normal kid, she has new things to worry about, like getting her second detention in two weeks for showing up late to class.

She glances at the car dashboard again. 8:00. Her heart skips a beat, but mercifully, they pull up in front of school only a few minutes later.

El is thankful to see that there are still a couple of other students trickling into the building. At least she won't be the only late person in the entire school.

Hopper is eyeing the other students as well, though evidently for different reasons. "So," he casually says as El unbuckles her seatbelt, "That Mike guy. He's not somewhere out here, is he?"

The mention of Mike effectively rattles El from her previous worried reflections, and she blushes brightly.

"W-what?" She stammers, "No! He's in class." Because if there's one thing that El knows about Mike, it's that he never skips school.

*He's so smart. And funny. And cute. And—*

"Oh," Hopper replies, looking slightly disappointed. He pauses, then adds, "Can you tell me what he looks like, at least?"

El's sappy thoughts come to a jarring halt. "No!" She protests, throwing Hopper an affronted frown.

"What's his last name?"

*"Dad!"*

"I wanna know!"

"Dad, I'm late!"

"Alright, alright," Hopper sighs resignedly, "Sorry. Good luck today."

"Thank you," El replies, placing a hand on the door handle.

"Remember what we talked about on Friday," Hopper reminds her, "No more detentions. Be smart."

"I remember!" El says, holding back an exasperated sigh. "No more messing around. I promise."

Hopper gives her a small smile, and even though El feels exhausted and embarrassed, she can't help but smile back.

"Bye," she says, then hurries out of the car. She crosses the parking lot at lightning speed, careful not to trip over her own feet. The school hallways are completely deserted when she enters, though she doesn't take much time to look around. She rushes to her locker, quickly undoes the combination, and grabs everything she needs for her first period English class.

She slams her locker door shut and is just about to run to class when she hears it.

*"Hello? Anybody?"*

The muffled call echoes down the empty hallway, followed by the sound of hands pounding against metal.

El's brow furrows, and for a moment, she wonders if she imagined the sound, but then it's back.

*"Is anyone out there? Hello?"*

El recognizes the voice, she's certain.

Someone needs help.

There's a lurch of hesitation in her gut as she realizes that stopping to help will mean that she's even more late to class, but a second later, the lurch is gone.

She follows the sound of rattling metal to its source - a locker at the opposite end of the hallway. Her eyes widen as she realizes someone is trapped *inside* the locker.

She takes a deep breath and steps forward. "Hello?" She calls out, gently tapping on the door.

"Finally!" The voice exclaims in relief, and now that El is up close, there's no mistaking who it is. "Can you get me out of here?"

"What's the combination?" El asks, looking at the lock.

The voice recites the numbers, El turns the lock accordingly, and then the locker door springs loose, freeing its captive.

A red, white, and blue baseball cap falls out first, followed by none other than Dustin Henderson himself.

"Son of a bitch!" Dustin curses as he tumbles onto the hallway floor.

El jumps back, eyes wide with surprise.

Thankfully, the fall doesn't seem to have done that much damage, as Dustin quickly scrambles to his feet. He glances around confusedly before his gaze lands on El. His expression contorts into one of pure, unadulterated shock.

"Holy shit!" He exclaims, staring at El. "You?!"

El isn't quite sure how to respond. "Yeah," she replies awkwardly, "I heard you calling. It just, uh, sounded like you needed help."

Dustin doesn't reply, still looking completely astounded.

El wonders if he's broken. Still a little unsure of what she should do, she steps forward, grabs his hat off the ground, and brushes it off.

"Here," she offers, holding it out to him with a small smile.

Dustin is still frozen for a moment. Eventually, his mind catches up to the rest of him, and he takes the hat from her. "Thanks," he replies, eyeing her cautiously.

El nods at Dustin, then glances behind him. "Who put you in the locker?"

Dustin hesitates, then, with an eye-roll, mutters, "Troy."

El rolls her eyes too, shaking her head in disgust. *Of course.* "Why?"

"I dunno!" Dustin shrugs, "Does it matter? He was just being an asshole like he always is."

El frowns. "Why do you let him treat you like that?"

Dustin eyes her critically. "It's not like I exactly have a choice in the matter. It just kind of happens."

He has a point.

Dustin turns to grab his things out of his locker, hastily shoving them into his backpack. "Mrs. Bradford is gonna kill me for being late," he mutters, slamming his locker door shut and turning to face El again.

"Mrs. Bradford?" El echoes.

"Yeah? The English teacher? The one who always has a huge stick up her ass?"

"I know. I have her class right now too. We're in it together."

"*Oh,* that's *right,*" Dustin nods slowly as realization sets in.

There's an awkward beat of silence, then El hesitantly offers: "We could walk to class together? She might be less mad that way."

Dustin eyes her again. "You think?"

El gives a small shrug. "We could try."

Dustin's gaze narrows suspiciously. "This isn't some kind of trap, is it? Like, you're not going to lead me off down some dark hallway and club me over the head or murder me or something?"

El can't help but snort as she imagines such a ridiculous scenario. "No!"

"Okay! Just making sure!" Dustin insists, holding up his hands in self-defense, "I know Mike is into you, or whatever, but to the rest of us, you're still a little scary, not gonna lie. Especially with all the—" he stops and motions to his own eyes, referencing her dark eyeshadow.

El, having only heard half of what he just said, feels as if her heart has stopped. "Into me?" She repeats, trying so hard not to blush.

"Shit," Dustin's eyes widen in alarm, "Look, I didn't mean into you like he's *into you*. He's not. I think he hates you, actually."

El's face pales. "What?"

"Okay, so that's kind of a lie!" Dustin quickly amends, "He doesn't hate you."

"Then why did you say that?"

"Because," Dustin trails off unhelpfully, making a frustrated sort of whining sound. "Look, I don't know. I spent my whole morning getting my head bashed into a locker, I think I have brain damage now."

El gives him a gentle smile. "You're not brain damaged," she assures him. "You're still really smart."

Dustin looks slightly flustered and waves the sentiment off. "Let's just head to class," He says bashfully, already starting to hurry down the hallway, "We're already 15 minutes late."

"Which is an hour in Bradford time," El finishes, following him.

Dustin gives a snort of a laugh, turning to smile at her. "Yeah! I swear to god, she has absolutely no grasp on the concept of time."

They hurry down the hallway together, and as they walk, El can't help but notice the faint bruise blooming on the side of Dustin's face.

*Troy.*

El frowns again as anger tightens her gut. "I can't stand him," she mutters.

"What?" Dustin asks, glancing at her. "Who?"

"Troy," El answers, motioning to Dustin's face.

"Oh. Right. I mean, it's not that big of a deal, I'm kinda used to it by now, you know?"

"Still. He treats everyone like that — like he's better than them."

Dustin makes a dismissive *pfft*. "Please. Troy just thinks he's hot shit because he got his license before anyone else in our grade," he says with an eye roll.

El pauses, then gives him a wry smile. "Max and I could torch his car, if you wanted," she jokes.

Dustin laughs again, and El has to admit that it's one of the happiest sounds she's ever heard. "Oh my god, that'd be the funniest thing ever," he wheezes, "He'd lose his shit!"

El giggles with him, and the two arrive at the closed doorway of Mrs. Bradford's English classroom.

Dustin places his hand on the doorknob, but before turning it, stops to glance back at her. "Thanks again," he says, clearing his throat. "For helping me."

El nods and smiles back.

They enter the classroom as Mrs. Bradford is in the midst of giving yet another lecture on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The students turn in their seats to look at the door, all anxious to see how had the nerve to show up so late.

Max is in the class too, and when El and Dustin enter in together, there's no missing the completely confused look on her face.

'What the hell?' Max mouths, looking between El and Dustin.

El gives a small shake of her head before quickly taking her seat beside Max.

"Henderson, Hopper. Nice of you to finally join us," Mrs. Bradford says, clearly perturbed as Dustin and El sit down, "May I ask *why* you felt entitled enough to completely disregard the need to show up on time?"

Dustin and El exchange glances.

"We were..." Dustin says slowly, and El can practically see his mind feverishly working to come up with an excuse.

El scans the room before her gaze lands on the book in Mrs. Bradford's hands. "In the library!" She finishes, throwing Dustin a pointed look.

"Yeah!" Dustin continues, "I, uh, lost my copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, so I went to the library to get one from there."

"And you needed Miss Hopper for that?"

"Yeah, totally," Dustin ad-libs, speaking faster now, "You see, I have like, no clue how the Dewey Decimal system works. But El here, she knows like, everything about it."

"Yeah." El nods.

"And so," Dustin continues, "She offered to help me out because we both agree that there's nothing more valuable than the gift of literature, Mrs. Bradford. I wanted to make sure that I could contribute to the class discussion as much as possible!"

Their story makes zero sense. It's filled with holes and pretty much an obvious lie, but El knows Dustin doesn't want to admit to the whole class that Troy was shoving him into lockers.

Despite this, Mrs. Bradford mercifully seems either to fall for it or not care enough to question it.

"Don't let it happen again," she simply warns, giving them both a grave glare, "I have extra copies here in this classroom."

El and Dustin nod before slumping back in their seats. The two exchange relieved smiles, both thankful to have avoided getting their second detentions.

Max is still looking completely confounded by the whole situation, and, as soon as Mrs. Bradford returns to her lecture, hastily scribbles something onto a piece of notebook paper.

She folds up the paper and deftly tosses it onto El's desk, making sure to do so only when Bradford's back is turned.

El opens the note, trying her best to read Max's sloppy handwriting.

*What the hell just happened?*

El glances at their teacher before scribbling back, *Nothing!*

She passes the note back to Max. Max reads it, gives El a flat, 'are you serious,' kind of look, and writes back, *What were you two doing? Making out?*

El's face scrunches up. *No! He was stuck in his locker (don't tell anyone). I helped him.*

*Good, 'cause Wheeler would have probably cried if you were.*

*No!*

*Uh, yeah? He's so in love with you, it's pathetic. I ran into him at the arcade yesterday, and he totally asked about you.*

*Really? What did he say?* El pauses, then frowns. *Why were you at the arcade?*

When Max reads the note, her face pales slightly. *No reason,* she writes back, *He just asked if you were there.*

El feels her heart skip a beat. Mike had asked about her! Dustin said he was 'into her!' Granted, the latter statement had been followed up with, 'he actually hates you,' but Dustin said that that was a lie, right? El certainly hoped that it was.

*What did you say?* She writes Max.

*No, obviously.*

*Oh.*

*Yeah. Hey, so, Jennifer Hayes is throwing this big party this weekend, and she kinda invited us.*

*What?*

*I know, it's weird. She's inviting everyone, basically.*

*Everyone?*

Max reads the note, looks up with a smirk, and mouths, '*Everyone.*'

Max knows exactly who El is hoping will be there.

El blushes.

---

[A/N]: So, we've learned a little more about El's past, but not everything. Don't fret - more will be revealed in later chapters! Her backstory is similar to hers in the show, but to make this AU work, I did have to change some things.

There's also been a sad lack of Mileven in the past two chapters - perhaps Jennifer Hayes' party is the best way to remedy this? Stay tuned!

Once again, thanks for reading, commenting, liking, etc. You readers are the actual best!

## 6. Lights Out

They're eating lunch when it happens.

Jennifer Hayes approaches their table in the school cafeteria, flanked by two of her friends.

Dustin sees them coming first and proceeds to hiss, "*Incoming!*"

The other boys look up, but by then, Jennifer's already standing there. As she looks at them expectantly, Mike starts to understand what Dustin was saying about the high school hierarchy. Being one of, if not THE, most popular girl in their grade, there's an aura Jennifer gives off, like some kind of foreign, otherworldly being.

The other boys seem to have picked up on this aura too, as all of them are staring at Jennifer, dumbfounded.

"Hey!" She greets them, flipping her blonde hair over her shoulder.

The boys blink back.

Jennifer smiles at them before her gaze locks on Will. "Are you guys free Saturday night?"

"I think so," Will glances at his friends. "I mean...I'm not sure..."

"Why?" Mike asks, eyeing Jennifer cautiously.

"My parents are going to be out of town," Jennifer explains, still smiling brightly, "I'm throwing a big party at my house. Everyone in the whole school is going to be there, it's going to be like, totally awesome."

"And you're inviting *us*?" Dustin asks, sounding shocked. Lucas nudges him and gives him a dirty look.

"Why not?" Jennifer shrugs, "I want it to be the biggest party of the year." Her gaze flits back to Will and stays there as she pointedly asks, "So, can you come?"

Will smiles awkwardly. "Maybe?" He turns to look at his friends again. "I mean, if you guys want to."

Mike hesitates. "*Everyone's* going to be there?"

"Totally!"

The boys glance at each other.

"Can you give us a minute?" Dustin asks.

Jennifer's brow furrows slightly. "Yeah?"

The boys turn their backs to her, lean over the table, and huddle close together, exchanging hushed whispers.

"*Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit!*" Dustin hisses.

"Dustin! Calm down, it's just a party!" Lucas hisses back.

"It's not just a party, Lucas! The hierarchy, remember? This is a complete fracture of the laws of high school as we know it!"

"She keeps staring at me," Will complains, glancing back at Jennifer.  
"Why is she staring?"

"Because she's popular!" Dustin says. "Popular girls are weird like that!"

"We've never been to a popular person's party," Lucas reminds them.  
"Or...any party, really."

"What should we do?" Will asks.

The three turn to look pleadingly at Mike, who's been silently thinking this entire time. "Wait, why me?" He asks, glancing between his friends.

"You're our Paladin, Mike!" Dustin reminds him, "You gotta lead us!"

Mike takes a breath, hesitates. "I mean, it could be fun, right? She said everyone's going to be there, it'd be weird if we weren't."

"Yeah," Lucas nods, "Plus, maybe we could like, talk to other people there."

"You mean people like Max?" Dustin snorts.

Lucas scowls. "That's not who I meant."

"That's so who you meant."

"Well, whatever! Just because you hate them, doesn't mean we all have to!"

"I don't hate them!" Dustin asserts.

"Yes, you do!"

"Actually, for your information, Lucas, I spent all morning talking with El Hopper. It was pleasant."

"You did *what*!?" Mike squawks.

"She saved me from getting a detention from Bradford!" Dustin explains, "Also, full disclaimer, Mike: I might have accidentally told her that you were kind of into her."

"YOU DID WHAT!?" Mike repeats, louder.

"Shhhhhh, it's fine! I totally covered for you. I told her that you hated her, then she got all freaked out—"

"WHAT!?"

"—So then I told her that you didn't hate her, and changed the subject, and she totally forgot about it!"

"Dustin, I swear to god—"

"Uh, guys?" Jennifer calls out, still staring at their backs.

"One second!" Dustin hastily replies before rejoining the boy's huddle.

"I think we should go to the party," Lucas says.

"I guess it could be fun," Will admits, "If we all stay together."

"It's probably a trap," Dustin adds, "But...I guess it wouldn't hurt to check it out."

"Alright — all in favor of going to the party, say 'aye,'" Mike instructs.

"Aye."

"Aye."

"Aye."

"Okay, then."

The boys nod, pull apart, and turn back to Jennifer.

"I guess we'll go," Mike shrugs nonchalantly, trying to make it appear as if this whole scenario wasn't a big deal, or anything.

"Great!" Jennifer chirps, giving Will another pointed smile, "See you then!"

With a final flick of her hair, she saunters off, taking her two giggling friends with her.

The boys watch her walk off before turning to look at each other, grinning excitedly.

"She totally likes you, Will," Dustin says, sounding slightly jealous.

Will doesn't look impressed. "I guess," he shrugs, turning his attention back to his lunch. "I'm mostly going for you guys."

Mike gives Will a smile before turning to speak to the group. "Don't worry guys, it's going to be fine," he assures them. "We're going to have a good time!"

"Agreed!" Dustin nods, taking a bite of his lunch (a baloney sandwich). "Just as long as we stick together - it'll be safer that way."

Mike throws Dustin an annoyed look. "Yeah. Totally," he replies flatly.

Dustin eyes him. "What?"

"You called me a traitor, and then acted like a traitor yourself! You totally messed things up with El!"

"I didn't mess things up!"

"You told El that I like her and then that I hate her! I don't know which one is worse!"

"I'm sorry!" Dustin whines, "But look on the bright side: you'll probably get a chance to talk to her at the party!"

"Oh, so *now* you want me to talk to her?"

"Do whatever you want, Mike! I'm just saying that maybe, possibly, I might have jumped to conclusions about her."

"No shit," Lucas says dryly.

"I'm really sorry," Dustin says sincerely, "El isn't as awful as I thought she'd be, ok? She seems pretty nice, still scary, but nice. Can I make it up to you? Like, I could be your wingman at the party!"

Will eyes him. "You know how to be a wingman?"

"I could learn."

"By Saturday?"

"Yes, by Saturday."

Mike takes a deep breath. As frustrated as he is with Dustin, and as worried as he is about El, he knows that Dustin would never go out of his way to sabotage one of Mike's relationships. They're best friends, brothers really, and he knows that they'll always have each other's backs.

"It's okay, Dustin," Mike sighs, giving his friend an earnest look.

Dustin's expression brightens. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. You were just trying to protect our party, which is what

any good Bard would do."

The two friends exchange smiles, Will changes the subject to the big history papers they all have coming up, and lunch ends without further event.

Then it's on to Biology class.

They've moved on from anatomy and dissections to cells and DNA. Even though the subject fascinates Mike, he can't help but feel distracted as his mind continually drifts back to Jennifer Hayes' party.

*He should talk to El.*

The thought lingers, and no matter how much Mike tries to distract himself with nucleotides, all he can think about is whether or not she's going to the party.

When Biology class ends, Mike takes his time packing his things up. Just like he had last week, he hovers near the doorway, waiting for El to pass by.

When she looks up and meets his gaze, Mike can't help but smile shyly. "Hey," he says as she walks over to him

El gives him a soft look. "Hi."

The two begin to walk out into the hallway together. Mike takes a deep breath before asking, "So, did you hear about Jennifer Hayes' party?"

El tucks a strand of hair behind her ears and nods. "Yeah."

"Oh, okay..." Mike trails off as he starts to question his exact thought process for approaching El about this. "So, are you going?"

El glances at him. "I'm not sure. Are you?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Oh."

Mike looks away from her before asking a question that rattles his nerves and causes his cheeks to flush pink. "Maybe I'll see you there?" He asks quickly.

El blinks at him. For a moment, Mike worries that she's so taken aback by the question that she's going to burst out laughing, or even keel over in disgust. Thankfully, neither of those scenarios play out.

"Yeah!" El answers, giving Mike a small smile that makes his heart flip. "That would be good."

"Great!" Mike replies, then, not wanting to sound too eager, relaxes. "I mean, cool," he amends nonchalantly.

"Cool," El repeats, nodding.

"So...see you then?"

"Yeah!"

It's not like it's a date, or anything. They're just both agreeing to probably be in the same location at the same time, a location that will also be housing at least a hundred other people. Nevertheless, the interaction still leaves Mike so starry-eyed that he promptly proceeds to run into a pole.

El's eyes widen. "Mike?!"

As Mike stumbles backward, a whirlwind of emotions hits him all at once.

Firstly, anger — who the hell puts poles in the middle of a hallway anyway?

Secondly, pain — his head is pounding and he's now seeing stars for a completely different reason.

Thirdly, embarrassment — he would have given anything to have sunken into the floor right about now.

Fourthly, giddiness — he knows it's stupid, but his name sounds so much better when El says it, and shit, he's really turning into a total

wasteoid...or experiencing a concussion, probably...

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Mike says quickly, brushing himself off. "I was, just, uh...checking to make sure that this pole was secure."

El quirks an eyebrow at him.

"As you can see," Mike continues, "It's pretty good. It passed my inspection, so, it's uh, obviously, a very secure pole."

A beat passes. Then El's smiling, and then giggling, and then laughing louder than he's ever heard from her.

Mike is taken aback by this. Unsure of how to respond, he settles for giving El an awkward smile as she tries to collect herself.

"O-oh!" she stammers, trying to stop herself from laughing.

*Oh?* Mike wasn't sure if that was a good or bad sign, but either way, he'd take it over something like wow-I-can't-believe-how-much-of-a-loser-you-are-Mike.

Even if it is a bad sign, Mike has to admit that embarrassing himself was worth it just to hear El laugh. It's a bright, intoxicating sound that makes his heart feel all weird and his head all dizzy (though, to be fair, the latter could be due to the fact that he'd just rammed his head into a concrete pole).

He instantly starts planning out ways to make her laugh again, to see her smile, to see her cheeks all flushed, just like they were now.

"I'm sorry," El apologizes, her laughter finally dying down. "You could have been hurt. Are you?"

"It's no big deal," Mike shrugs. "I'll be fine, really."

El eyes him. "Promise?"

He nods. "Yeah, promise."

El nods back, seemingly satisfied with his response.

The school bell rings, signaling that it's time to head to the next class.

Mike and El glance at the bell, then back at each other. Their eyes meet as they share one last awkwardly shy gaze.

"So, Saturday?" El asks.

Mike smiles hopefully. "Yeah!"

El smiles back, nods, and walks off.

Mike is left grinning like an idiot.

*It's not a date*, he repeats to himself as he heads to his 7th-period class, because it's not.

Just two people, along with a hundred other people, in the same place, at the same time.

It's totally not a date.

...It's still kinda close, though.

It hits Mike halfway through 7th-period that he still doesn't know whether or not El has a boyfriend.

...*Shit*.

---

On Saturday evening, El goes to Max's house. She tells Hopper that they're going to have a sleepover, even though that's not particularly true. El hates lying to her dad, but she knows that he wouldn't be thrilled about the idea of her going to an unsupervised high school party, even if she did have Max with her.

The girls spend more time getting ready for the party than they'd like to admit. The permutations of all their combined skirts, jeans, leggings, tops, jackets, and t-shirts are explored in-depth, and it's not until the late afternoon that they finally come to a decision. After that, El helps Max tease her ponytail, and Max helps El apply some mascara (since El always manages to poke herself in the eye when she tries to do it herself).

They also have more fun getting ready for the party than they'd like to admit.

Even though Max always says that she hates pop music, when *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* starts playing on her bedroom stereo, she can't help but lip-sync along with El.

"This is so stupid!" Max laughs halfway through.

"We're going to a party!" El replies excitedly, taking Max's hands and pulling her into a little dance.

"I know."

"It's going to be fun!"

"I know."

"Lucas is going to be there!"

Max snorts. "Like you care that Lucas is going to be there."

El flushes pink and drops Max's hands. She tries to roll her eyes the way that Max does whenever she doesn't care about something.

"You're not even going to try and deny it?" Max smirks, giving El a nudge.

El's blush deepens. She pulls away from the Max and goes to examine her reflection in Max's bedroom mirror.

"Wow," Max says dryly. "You two are so in love with each other, I don't know whether it's cute or disgusting."

"He's not in love with me," El replies modestly.

"He literally just asked you out on a date."

"It's not—"

*Wait.*

El's eyes widen. Is this a date? She's not sure. She's never gone on one

before, what is she supposed to do? She's not ready for this. What if she does something wrong?

"I...I don't think it's a date..." El mumbles nervously. "He just said that maybe he'd see me."

Max scoffs. "That's just nerd-speak for 'I love you, please go out with me.'"

El turns to look at Max, still wide-eyed. Max smirks, crosses the room, and places her hand on El's shoulder. "Face it, El, you're going on a date with Wheeler."

El blanches.

*Oh, no, no, no, no.*

El spends the rest of their prep-time trying to hide how anxious she is. She tries to think back to all the date-scenes in chick-flicks she's watched, but for some reason, the only movie she can think of is *Halloween*, which is *really not helping*.

Much too soon, it's already 8:00 — time to leave for the party.

"Let's do this!" Max says confidently, grabbing El's hand and pulling her out of the bedroom. They head into Max's living room, where her parents are seated on the living room sofa. Her mother is knitting, while her step-father watches the nightly newscast with a scowl on his face.

"Can you believe this?" Mr. Hargrove scoffs, pointing at the screen.

"El and I are ready to go," Max announces, ignoring him.

Max's parents are slightly less strict about their daughter going to a party with El, but that's mostly because Max described said party as 'not being a big deal,' and just 'a small little get-together.'

"Alright," Max's mother, "Billy's going to drive you."

*"What the hell?! Why?!"*

"Watch your tone," Max's step-father scolds, giving her a warning look.

El watches as Max forces herself to hold back an eye roll. "Why does Billy have to drive us?" Max says again, voice flat.

"I have to cook for the Sunday potluck tomorrow," Max's mother replies, not looking up from her knitting needles.

Max turns to her father.

"Billy can drive you," He says sternly, "He needs to start pulling his weight around here."

El and Max both exchange frustrated scowls. They hate riding in Billy's car. He always drives too fast and plays the music too loud. The car seats are always sticky and smell like empty beer cans and pungent cologne.

But if it's either driving with Billy or not going at all...

20 minutes and a handful of arguments later, the girls are rattling around in the back of Billy's blue Camaro. He's still pissed to have to be doing this, as he continually reminds them.

"I can't believe I have to drive you shits," he mutters, drumming his fingers on the dashboard. "I'm not your damn babysitter."

"Well, maybe if someone remembered to pay their rent on time, they wouldn't get evicted and have to move back home at 20 years old," Max says sarcastically, eyes trained on the roof of the car.

Billy drives over a pothole in response.

It's moments like these that El is thankful to be an only child.

Thankfully, it doesn't take long to arrive at Jennifer Hayes' house. As Billy screeches the Camaro to a stop, the girls can see that the party is already in full swing. Cars are parked up and down the entire block. There are large groups of people milling around the front lawn, illuminated by the lights of the house.

"If you're not out here by 11:30, you're walking home," Billy snaps, "Now get out."

Max and El exit the car. With a roar of the engine and a scream of the tires, Billy drives the Camaro off into the night.

"Asshole," Max gripes, flipping off the retreating vehicle.

El offers her friend a somber smile. "You okay?"

Max nods before shaking herself off. "Yeah," she mutters, "Whatever. Let's just go inside."

They approach the house together, making sure to stay close. El can tell before they even enter that the house is completely trashed — red solo cups scatter the grass, toilet paper is strewn over the bushes, and older-looking kids are grinding cigarette butts onto the front porch.

"This place is crazy," Max comments, sounding awe-struck.

"Yeah," El smiles nervously.

They enter the house, which is packed to the brim with rowdy high schoolers. A bass-heavy pop synth track is blaring over a speaker that's located somewhere deep within the house. El can feel each pounding beat reverberate in her gut, shaking her to her core. The air smells of smoke, sweat, and beer cans (much like Billy's car, coincidentally).

*How is she supposed to find Mike in all this?*

"C'mon," Max states, gripping El's hand. "Let's look around."

They wander the party aimlessly, trying to avoid the occasional scuffle between angry, intoxicated teenagers or the uncomfortably public displays of affection between love-sick couples.

"Do you see Lucas or Mike anywhere?" Max calls out. She has to raise her voice to be even slightly audible over all the ruckus.

"No!" El replies, shaking her head. This whole party is so

overwhelming, she's not sure where they would even begin to look for them.

Max opens her mouth to say something, but then one of the angry, intoxicated teenagers suddenly stumbles into her, knocking the wind out of her.

"Max!" El gasps in alarm.

"What the hell?" Max snaps, jumping back.

"Shit, sorry," the stranger slurs, grasping his plastic red cup tightly.

"Max, your shirt!" El says hesitantly, pointing to it.

Max looks down to see a sticky, frothy liquid streaming down her shirt. "Seriously?!" She snaps, looking up angrily, but by then, the offender (and his now empty beer cup) is gone.

"We can find a bathroom," El offers.

"Fine!" Max scowls. The two wander the house, traversing through the snaking hallways, until they finally stumble upon one near the back of the house.

Even though people are hanging around the corridor, the bathroom itself is unoccupied.

"Do you want help?" El asks as Max steps into the bathroom.

"I think I know how to clean a shirt," Max replies grumpily.

El frowns. She knows that Max isn't angry with her, but she still hates to see her friend upset. "Okay," she replies quietly, "I'll wait out here."

Max slams the bathroom door shut, El takes a step back.

This isn't what El thought a party would be like. She thought that there'd be dancing, better music, and at least some snacks, but instead, it's all blaring noise, constant shouting, and spilled drinks.

She wishes that Mike was here. He'd know just what to say to make

her smile and laugh.

*So, where is he?*

Impatience eats away at her. As El continues to wait for Max in the hallway, she can't help but feel an overwhelming amount of anxiety loom over her. Mike still isn't here yet, and it's driving her crazy. If this really is a date, their *first* date, then she wants everything to go perfectly.

She needs to relax.

El leans back against the hallway wall and closes her eyes, trying to block out the pulsating bass music, the ceaseless yelling (*why* was everyone yelling so much?), and the haze of smoke and booze that hangs thick in the air.

It's not working.

She opens her eyes again, frowning in frustration. It's only then that she realizes there's someone leaning on the wall beside her. It's an older boy that she's pretty sure she's seen around school — Greg or Gary or George or something else irrelevant.

"Hey," Greg/Gary/George says, tilting a plastic cup towards her.

"Hey," El mumbles, not really looking at him.

"It's a pretty crazy party, huh?" He remarks.

"Crazy," El echoes. She shifts in place awkwardly.

"You're El, right?"

"Right," El says, still not looking at him. She glances down the end of the hallway hopefully, hoping to spot that familiar mop of wavy black hair.

Nothing.

"I've seen you around school," Greg/Gary/George continues.

"Oh," El stands on tiptoe, but there are so many people in the way, and she's starting to get a headache, and *where is Mike, he said he'd be here.*

Maybe.

He'd said that *maybe* he'd be here.

El feels her heart sink and she slumps back against the wall resignedly.

"You waiting for someone?"

El finally glances up at the stranger. He's classically attractive, like the guys El sees in the romance movies she secretly loves to watch. Blonde hair, blue eyes, easy grin. Not Mike.

"Kind of," she replies guardedly.

"You seem nervous."

El frowns. "Really?" She asks worriedly. She can't seem nervous. She doesn't want Mike to think she was a huge wimp who couldn't even handle one party.

"Yeah, you're pretty jumpy. It's cute though."

El chooses to disregard the latter statement. She tries to take a breath to calm herself, but then she starts looking down the hallway again, and she keeps wondering if Mike is ever going to show up, and then she wonders if he even *should* show up because she feels so awkward and nervous and she *doesn't want to mess up.*

"I-I'm not jumpy," she replies, but even as she says it, she can hear her voice wavering.

"Jesus, you're totally freaked," Greg/Gary/George snorts. "You need to relax."

El gives him a withering glance. "How?"

"Here," he answers, holding his red solo cup out to her.

El eyes the cup cautiously.

"It's good for your nerves," He explains, "It just totally chills you right out."

Even though this is El's first high school party, she's not stupid. She knows what's inside the cup. She can smell it on the breath of almost every person here.

"I don't think so," El says slowly, though her gaze is still locked on the drink.

"It'll make you feel better, I promise."

What she wouldn't give to feel better right now. To not feel scared, intimidated. For Mike to like her. For Mike to think that she was cool, that she had everything under control.

*Mike, Mike, Mike.*

El takes a deep breath.

In one quick, albeit shaky, movement, she grabs the cup from his hands and starts to chug the drink down. The taste is vile and makes her mouth burn, but she doesn't stop, not until the music starts to fade, the room begins to blur, and her senses grow fuzzy.

She feels herself go numb, blissfully numb.

---

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Dustin says as the guys approach Jennifer's house.

They'd parked their bikes in the bushes a couple blocks away, but even from that distance, they could still hear the pulsating rhythm of the party. Up close, it's even worse.

Mike takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders. He's the leader, the Paladin, and he's got this.

Or, more accurately, he has to pretend he does.

"We already biked all the way over here!" Mike reminds them, "We should at least check it out!"

"I guess," Dustin says slowly, looking a little reluctant.

Will looks the most reluctant of all. "Someone just threw up in the bushes," he says warily.

"They're probably fine," Mike assures him, despite the fact that he has no idea whether or not this is true.

"We can't just pussy out," Lucas says, though his muttered declarations seem more directed towards himself than anyone else.

The boys eye the rowdy house with a sense of reluctant awe. As intimidating as the party looks, it's hard to say that it's not a little bit alluring.

"Fine," Dustin sighs, resignedly, "Let's go in. But if I die in there, I'm totally gonna murder you guys."

"We're not going to die!" Mike insists. He takes the lead and guides the group closer to the house, hoping that he doesn't look as freaked out as he feels.

Stepping into the party feels like stepping into another dimension. They have to maneuver around the swarming mass of teenagers milling around the front porch. The music is so loud, Mike can feel his brain rattling. The entire house seems like it's ready to burst, and Mike finds himself amazed that no one has called the cops yet.

"Did she invite literally EVERYONE in the entire school?!" Dustin exclaims, holding onto his hat. Even though they've only been inside the house for a few minutes, he's almost lost it twice, thanks to the ever-jostling party guests.

"Looks like it!" Mike replies, raising his voice to be heard over all the commotion.

"Can we find someplace quieter?" Will pleads, barely audible.

Mike nods, and as he continues to lead the way, he can't help but

scan the crowds, hoping that he'll stumble across the main reason he's at this party to begin with.

*El.*

Mike leads his friends towards the back of the house, further away from the mind-numbingly loud radio.

They're just about to go down the back corridor when he hears it.

"*You asshole!*"

Mike stops. He knows that voice. His gaze darts about, trying to locate its source.

Lucas finds it before he does. "It's Max!" He squeaks, sounding flustered.

Sure enough, Mike finally spots Max. She's a couple feet away, wearing a stained t-shirt and dark jeans, and is absolutely fuming. In front of her, the person she's yelling at: an older-looking guy. Beside him —

*El!*

Mike has pretty much grown accustomed to the way his heart flips whenever he sees her, and right now is no different.

She's leaning up against the wall, sporting a dark leather jacket, black tights, and a brightly-colored skirt. She's gazing up at the guy beside her, giggling at something that he'd said, and *oh, shit, that's totally her boyfriend.*

Mike feels his heart sink. It has to be him, right? Why else would she be totally *all over him* like that and *smiling* like that and *leaning closer to him* like that?

He feels like a total idiot.

Mike starts to turn away, wanting nothing more than to just get out of this stupid party as quickly as possible.

Before he can leave, El spots him. Her gaze suddenly meets his, causing her eyes to widen.

"Mike!" She cries out.

Mike hesitates. "El?"

Seconds later, El rushes over to him, beaming excitedly. She flings her arms around him in a close hug, squeezing him tightly.

"Mike, Mike, Mike!" She gushes, talking into his chest. "You're here!"

It doesn't take long for Mike to figure out what's going on. El is swaying in place as she clutches into him, and even though her head is currently tucked under his chin, he can still smell the alcohol drifting off her breath.

She's totally buzzed.

Mike glances at his friends helplessly, unsure of what to do.

"Is she drunk?" Dustin asks, looking concerned. "I'm pretty sure she's drunk."

"I think so," Will nods, giving Mike a sympathetic look.

Thankfully, Max starts to storm over to them, and even though her angered state makes her look mildly terrifying, Mike is desperate for her help.

"What happened to her?" Mike asks as Max joins them.

"That asshole, Greg McCorkle, gave her a drink," Max glowers, "I'm totally going to kill him."

"Greg? Her boyfriend?" Mike asks thickly.

"What?" Max's brow furrows even deeper. "No! El doesn't have a boyfriend!"

"I don't even know that guy's name," El giggles, still talking into Mike's chest.

Max eyes El, then lifts her gaze back to Mike. "She needs help. Her dad doesn't know that she's here, so I can't bring her home. My ride isn't coming to get us until 11:30!"

"Our ride is scary," El comments, "And bad."

"So what should we do?" Mike asks, flustered.

"I don't know what to do," Max admits, "I'm going to try and look for like, some aspirin and water for her, or something. Can you guys stay with her?"

"Of course!" Mike nods.

"I can help you!" Lucas offers Max, looking hopeful. "You shouldn't be by yourself."

Max raises an eyebrow. "And *you're* going to protect me?"

Lucas nods sincerely. "Yeah!"

"He totally can!" Dustin pipes up, "He went to karate camp all last summer. He's like, professionally trained."

Lucas, still smiling hopefully, glances at Dustin out of the corner of his eye. "Uh, right. I definitely did."

Max rolls her eyes. "Whatever. Just try to keep up, dweeb." She moves forward, grabs Lucas by the arm, and pulls him off down the hallway.

Lucas glances back at the guys excitedly, looking thrilled by the current turn of events.

"See? Wingman!" Dustin says, pointing to himself as Max and Lucas disappear into the crowd.

"Lucas never went to karate camp," Will points out, eyeing Dustin.

"Ok, so maybe that part wasn't completely accurate," Dustin admits, "But we spent all of last summer watching *The Karate Kid*, so we basically got professional martial arts training."

Will stares at Dustin, speechless.

Mike rolls his eyes. "C'mon guys, let's just find someplace to sit," he says, cradling El in his arms.

"Sit!" El echoes for no apparent reason.

Mike tries to step forward but finds it difficult with El koala-ing him. He carefully tries to pry her off of him, but she sticks to him like a magnet. He finally gets her to move to his side, where she hugs his left arm.

The four of them maneuver through the packed hallways, staying close together. Mike keeps an arm wrapped around El protectively.

They find a door to the basement and descend the stairs into it. The music is much more muffled down here, and Mike can finally hear himself think again.

There are several people down here, still talking quite loudly, but it'll have to do. Mike leads the way over to a couch that's pushed up against one of the walls, and sits down with El.

Will and Dustin follow suit, sitting on Mike's right as El is on his left.

As they start to wait, Dustin and Will try to pass the time by naming off periodic elements in their atomic order.

"Hydrogen," Dustin begins.

"Helium," Will continues.

"What are you guys doing?!" Mike exclaims, looking completely confused.

"Will and I both have our big Chemistry test on Monday," Dustin explains, "So, if we're gonna be trapped at this psychotic party, at least we can try to be productive! Lithium."

Mike shakes his head as he turns back to El, who finally releases the death-grip on his arm. She slumps back against the couch and tilts her head up to look at him. Her eyes are glazed over and shining as

she smiles warmly, and even though Mike knows this isn't a good time, like, *at all*, he can't help but notice how pretty she is.

"Hi," El says.

"Hey."

"Mike."

"Yeah?"

"Hi."

Mike tries not to laugh. "Hi, El."

"You came."

"Yeah."

"I thought you wouldn't."

Mike blushes a little. "I...uh...wanted to see you," he admits.

El smiles brighter. "I wanted to see you!" She says excitedly, "Really bad. But I got scared. And now my head hurts. I feel weird."

"Don't worry, El, it's ok," Mike assures her, "Max and Lucas are going to get some help for you, okay?"

El nods enthusiastically.

Mike gives her a gentle smile, and El smiles back. A moment passes, and then El starts to lean into his face, and for a frantic moment, Mike wonders if she's going to try to kiss him.

She doesn't.

"Pretty," El comments instead, smacking a hand against his cheek. She cradles his face in her palm as she examines him closely.

"Oh," Mike blushes harder, "Thanks, I guess."

"You're always pretty," El continues, "Like in History class."

"History class?"

"Last year," El explains, hiccuping, "I saw you. You fixed the condenser and I saw you."

"The condenser?" Mike echoes, trying to remember. He thinks he knows what she's talking about...

"Yes," El replies, "I saw you."

Mike is pretty sure that his entire face is red from blushing so much. "You did?" Mike didn't even know that El had even looked his way before that detention they'd shared a little over two weeks ago.

El nods, eyes narrowing. Without any warning, her hand then slides across his cheek and onto his nose, which she grasps tightly.

"Um," Mike says, voice sounding nasally, "What are you doing?"

El pulls back, her hand in a fist. "I have your nose," she says happily, pointing to her fist.

Mike knows he probably shouldn't, but he can't help but laugh. "You got it," he says to El, playing along with her.

"I got it," El repeats, smiling back at him.

Mike places his hands over his nose and frowns sadly, as if he was truly upset to be missing his nose, which causes El to absolutely lose it. She giggles so much that Mike has to grab her to keep her from falling off the couch.

"Mike!" She gasps, breathless as Mike props her back up.

Mike only smiles shyly at her as he listens to her laughs die down. When the giggles eventually subside, their gazes meet once more.

El studies him for a moment before her expression unexpectedly becomes downcast. "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I tell you something secret?"

Mike swallows, nods. "Of course, El. You can tell me anything, okay?"

El moves forward and leans in close to his ear. Though her breath still has the lingering tinge of alcohol, he now also notices the light smell of the lavender shampoo in her hair. Her breath brushes across his cheek as he sits completely still, transfixed.

El breathes in. Her lips only centimeters away from his ear, she whispers —

"I've never seen Star Wars."

*Wait, what?*

"What?" Mike's brow furrows in confusion as El pulls away.

"I'm sorry," El says forlornly, "I haven't. But when we talked on the phone, you asked if I wanted to read your Star Wars comics. I said yes, but I haven't seen the movie, so I can't read them, so that was like a lie."

At first, Mike thinks she's joking, but no, she looks actually, really upset about this. Her eyes begin to water as she looks down in shame.

"El!" Mike quickly exclaims, wrapping his arms around her in a hug, "It's ok!"

"I lied," El hiccups, burying her nose into his shoulder, "I'm a liar."

Their whole conversation is growing more nonsensical by the minute.

"You're not a liar," Mike assures her, "And I don't care that you've never seen Star Wars."

"Really?"

"Really."

El hiccups again and makes a happy sort of humming sound, burrowing deeper into his arms. "Okay."

"We could watch them together sometime, if you really wanted," Mike offers hesitantly, "I have them all on tape."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I want to," El nods, pulling back to look at his face, "I want to a lot."

"Then we will," Mike promises her.

El beams at him. Their faces are close again, and even though, once again, Mike knows that this REALLY isn't the right time, he keeps wondering if El is going to try and kiss him.

She doesn't.

"Mike, are we friends? I want to be friends," she pleads earnestly.

"We can be friends," Mike says bashfully.

"Best friends?"

"Best friends."

El grins and leans back in, resting her head on his shoulder. "Good," she slurs, sounding tired. "We're best friends."

Mike lets her rest on him. His arms tighten around her, keeping her safe as she cuddles him.

A short time later, when Will and Dustin have gotten up to Thallium, Max and Lucas descend the basement stairs.

"There you are!" Max exclaims, walking over to the couch, a glass in hand. "We had to search the whole house for a dumb glass of water. All the sinks in this place are totally disgusting."

"It was crazy!" Lucas adds, still looking at starry-eyed Max.

Max kneels before them, eyeing Mike carefully. "How's she doing?"

"Okay, I think," Mike replies. He gently shrugs El off of him so that

she can face Max.

"Max!" El smiles. "Hi!"

"Hey."

"Mike is my best friend," El tells Max excitedly, eyes still glazed over.  
"We're going to watch Star Wars."

"Cool," Max says dismissively, handing El the water. Lucas passes Max an aspirin, and Max passes it to El. "Drink this. Take this."

El follows her commands, though not without spilling a bit of water down her front. "Oh no," she pouts, looking down at her shirt.

"Don't worry about it," Max reassures her. She turns to Mike, Dustin, and Will, then, hesitantly adds, "Thanks for staying with her."

"Mike did most of the work," Will says truthfully.

"Mike!" El hiccups.

"I'm sure he did," Max replies with a wry look.

Mike feels his face grow hot. "What's that supposed to mean?" He questions, trying to sound as indignant as possible.

"Oh, nothing," Max says flatly, raising her eyebrows.

"It's just obvious that you like her," Dustin finishes under his breath.

"DUSTIN!" Mike yelps.

"Dustin!" El echoes happily.

"What!? It's true!" Dustin says defensively. "We're all thinking it!"

For the second time that week, Mike isn't sure if he wants to disappear, or if he wants to murder Dustin. A combination of both, probably. "Oh my god," he mutters, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

Thankfully, El seems so dazed out that she didn't fully process what

Dustin said. She instead goes back to snuggling Mike, humming along to the muffled music playing from upstairs.

"So, what should we do now?" Lucas asks, looking back and forth between Mike and Max.

Max grabs Lucas' arm and looks at the watch on his wrist. "It's only 10:30," she says as Lucas blushes furiously. "We still got an hour."

"Well, we could all just stay down here," Will suggests, looking between everyone.

"And what, hang out with you nerds?" Max scoffs indignantly, releasing Lucas' arm.

"I hate to break it to you," Dustin replies, eying her, "But it's either us or a bunch of drunk, soul-sucking teenagers."

Max falls silent. She glances between the guys, and then at El, who's clearly not planning on moving anytime soon.

"Fine," she relents, sitting down on the floor in front of the couch. "But don't think this means we're like, friends or anything."

"Mike's my best friend," El gushes.

"Good for him."

The next hour passes by in a surreal haze. At first, no one says anything. Hanging out together just feels so *weird* and unnatural, they're not sure how to handle it. But then Dustin makes a joke about Mrs. Bradford's English class, Max laughs and shares her own snide remarks, and the rest of the conversation snowballs from there. They don't talk about much more than jokes and gossip related to school, but it goes a lot more smoothly than expected, considering the circumstances.

When 11:25 rolls around, Max stands up and holds out her hand to El. "C'mon, El, we gotta get going. Billy is going to come get us."

"I want Mike to take me," El whines, voice still slurred.

Max eyes Mike and El impatiently. "Seriously?"

"It's ok!" Mike says, "We should probably get going too, it's getting late."

"We can all walk out together!" Lucas says eagerly.

"It'll probably be safer that way," Will adds.

"And since this party totally blows," Dustin remarks, "We really won't be missing anything by leaving right now."

"God, you guys are annoying," Max says with an eye roll, and yet, she still motions for them all to follow her as she moves towards the stairs.

The other five follow her, El still holding onto Mike's arm. She sways as she walks, and Mike has to fight to keep her upright.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Mike asks El, carefully escorting her up the basement stairs.

"Yes!" El insists, though she's struggling to keep her gaze focused on him.

"What was in that drink you had?"

"Too much."

Mike frowns concernedly, but continues helping her, coaching her up each step.

In the time they spent tucked away in the basement, the party has somehow grown even rowdier. Intoxication has fully set in, and tensions are at an all-time high. Mike feels himself start to grow a headache from the screeching heavy metal song that's pounding over the speakers. It doesn't help that the majority of the teens there are yelling too.

They have to literally shove themselves past people just to make it down the hallways and back towards the main living room. As they make their way closer, they can hear that the yelling is growing

louder, scarier, more concentrated. People are chanting, though Mike can't discern what it is.

When they enter the main living room, they see what the source of all the yelling is.

There's a fight about to break out between a couple of drunken, raving older guys. They keep taunting each other, cursing at each other, each daring the other to take the first blow. A circle of onlookers is formed around them, cheering them on. Jennifer Hayes is darting around on the sidelines, angrily ordering everyone to calm down.

"Oh my god," Dustin groans, turning to look back at his friends, "We're not going to make it out of here alive."

The yelling is escalating, the threats are becoming for violent.

Mike feels his heartbeat quicken as anxiety swells in his gut.

"They're going to murder each other!" Lucas hisses.

El's eyes grow wide in alarm, and she starts to shake. "W-what?" She asks, gripping Mike's arm tighter.

"Let's just try to squeeze past," Max insists, "Before my asshole brother drives off and I'm stuck at this wasteoid party."

"We're gonna be fine," Mike assures El, placing his hand over hers. "Just stay close to me."

El nods, and the group begins to make their way through the chanting crowd.

Then the first punch is thrown.

It lands with a sickening *crunch*, right into one of the guy's jaw, and all hell breaks loose. The guys in the middle of the circle start slamming into each other, a furious flurry of spitting curses and flying fists.

The crowd of students bursts into a roar, cheering on the guys' every

punch, jab, kick, and blow.

Jennifer Hayes is still losing her mind, for obvious reasons. "STOP IT!" She wails as they pound and pummel each other.

The guys ignore her, and as the onlookers continue to drunkenly chant and holler, the fight only escalates faster. Mike and the others are nearing the front door, but every time they're near escape, they keep getting sucked and jostled back into the crowd like quicksand.

The next few moments happen suddenly and all at once.

One of the guys yanks a lamp off a side table. The electrical cord is violently pulled out of the wall as he raises it above his head.

"DON'T YOU DARE!" Jennifer screeches.

He throws it.

His opponent ducks as the lamp hurtles towards the onlookers. The crowd ducks, leaving Mike and the others directly in the line of fire.

*"Holy shit!"* Dustin yelps.

"Get down!" Mike shouts.

He doesn't have time to see what happens next. Mike's eyes squeeze tightly shut as he falls to his knees, hands clamped down over his ears.

He waits, heart-pounding, hands shaking, for the terrifying sound of glass shattering against the wall to resound.

It doesn't.

Instead, there's a low, ringing hum that steadily grows louder, piercing the ears of everyone in the room. It fills the air and resonates in their bones, somehow even more brain-rattling than the heavy-metal music that's seemingly fading away.

Mike hesitantly looks up, and to his shock sees that all the lights in the room are flashing wildly. Their glow intensifies rapidly, as if their

bulbs were all about to burst at once. The other party-goers are covering their eyes and ears, blinded by the piercing white noise.

And then he sees it.

It's only for a split second, a frantic, terrifying fraction of time, but that's all it takes.

His gaze locks in on the lamp, hovering inches in front of him, frozen mid-air.

With an ear-shattering pop, the lightbulbs all burn out, plunging the entire house into darkness.

There's a beat of silence.

Mike hears the lamp crash to the floor at his feet.

Then, chaos.

Frantic exclamations are exchanged as everyone rushes to figure out what the hell just happened. The guys have ceased their fighting, and as Mike's eyes adjust to the darkness, he can tell that they look scared out of their minds.

"WHAT DID YOU GUYS DO!?" Jennifer bawls, "MY PARENTS ARE GOING TO KILL ME!"

Mike and the others rise to their feet, slack-jawed and wide-eyed.

"Holy shit!" Lucas exclaims, "Holy, actual, *shit!*"

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," Dustin rambles breathlessly, "We almost died. Did you see that?! We ALMOST DIED."

"The lights!" Will says frantically, face pale, "Why were they flashing?"

"Th-the lamp!" Mike stammers, "Did you guys see—"

He freezes when he remembers that El had been holding onto him. *Had.* As in, he'd let go of her when he'd ducked down.

Mike quickly turns to El, who's still standing beside him. She's swaying in place, silent.

"El? Are you okay?!" He asks her, grabbing her arms.

El blinks at him. Her eyes are distant. "*M-mike...*"

Without any warning, she collapses onto the floor, completely passed out. A small trickle of blood runs out from under her nose as her head lolls backward and her body falls limp.

Mike's heart stops. "*EL!?*" He instantly drops to his knees, cradling her head as carefully as if it was made of glass.

"Don't touch her!" Max suddenly snaps. She moves in to push Mike out of the way, bundling El into her arms.

"But she's hurt!" Mike replies worriedly.

El begins to stir in Max's arms, mumbling something intangible and incoherent.

"I'm getting her out of here!" Max insists, rising to her feet. "She's going to be fine, okay?"

Before any of the guys can stop her, Max is already pulling El out of the living room and out the front door. They disappear into the throng of kids rushing to escape the house, and within seconds are completely obscured from view.

It all happened too fast.

Mike stares after them, feeling hollow.

"Do you think she's going to be okay?" Will asks, looking up at Mike nervously.

Mike only shakes his head, completely stunned. He wants to speak, to say something, anything, but he's at a complete loss for words.

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[A/N]: Wow! That got dramatic real quick, am I right?

Annnnnnnn that's all I got! See ya' next chapter! El's gonna have a lot of explaining to do...

## 7. Telephone II

[A/N]: I probably should have said this earlier, but small disclaimer: in this AU, I don't imagine Hopper and El living in the cabin. They have a small, comfortable house, still kinda on the outskirts of town though.

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In the winter of 1980, the laboratory that El was raised in was shut down.

The morning that she learned this was completely ordinary. At least, it *had* been, up until Hopper had approached her, holding a copy of the *Chicago Tribune*.

"You see this, kid?" He asked, passing the newspaper to her.

El sat up on her bed, taking the newspaper from him with a puzzled look on her face. She scanned the front page article, mind working so fast, she was hardly digesting the words she was reading. The big stuff stuck out to her though. *Government conspiracy. Experimental malpractice. Hundreds of arrests. Complete shutdown.*

"It's over?" She whispered, looking up at Hopper in disbelief.

"Yeah, kid," Hopper knelt before her, smiling warmly, "It's over."

"We're safe?"

"We're safe. They can't hurt you."

*No more bad men.*

El let out a shaky breath, eyes starting to well with tears. Hopper pulled her in for a tight hug, and she collapsed into his arms.

The following fall, El started 6th grade at Hawkins Middle. She knew no one, nor how to get to know someone, and yet, everyone knew her.

People talked. They talked about how Hopper had left for Chicago

when he was 18 to become a big-city cop. They talked about he supposedly married. They talked about the daughter he had, the daughter he then brought back to Hawkins with him years later. The daughter that was then inexplicably sheltered for years, never leaving the house, never daring to venture into the public.

It was all half-truths, pieces of the story that didn't fit, but were instead shoved together to fit an easy-to-understand narrative. In reality, El's history was messy. It was dark, complicated, and something that she could never tell anyone.

And yet, people still talked. El was their enigma, their ghost story. She saw it in the scrutinizing stares they gave her when she walked into school for the first time. She could hear the whispers follow her throughout the entire day — *new girl, weirdo, shut-in, freak*.

By the time the day was halfway through, El had already grown so sick of it all. The stares, the whispers, the rumors. She thought that things would be different, that all the other kids would readily accept her. That they'd see her as being just like anyone else, as being *normal*.

She was naïve, blissfully naïve.

After pretending to not hear another round of judgmental snickers from some girls in her class, El just couldn't take it anymore. During lunchtime, when all the other kids were filing into the cafeteria, she'd dashed out the back doors and ran as far as her legs could take her.

Considering that she'd spent most of her life sitting around indoors, her legs didn't take her that far.

She made it to the soccer field, stopping beside the rows of metal bleachers. She hunched over, breathless, hands grasping her knees.

*This was a mistake. She was a mistake, and she didn't belong here, and soon everyone would find out just how different she was and—*

"Hey!"

El jolted upright, frightened by the sudden noise.

She looked over to see a girl eating her lunch on the bleachers, completely alone. The girl's hair was long and vividly red, and she was wearing a yellow sweatshirt and jeans. As she and El stared at each other, the girl took a bite of her sandwich.

"Hey," The girl called out again, mouth full, "You're that new kid, right? The one everybody's talking about?"

El blinked at her. It was the first time that day that someone was actually talking *to* her, not *about* her. She wasn't sure what to do.

"Um, hello?" The girl asked, raising an eyebrow, "Do you like, speak English?"

"Yes!" El replied quickly, moving closer to her.

"Yes, you're the new kid, or yes, you speak English?"

"Both?"

"Oh. Cool."

El nodded. A moment of silence passed before she hesitantly asked, "Why are you here?"

"Uh, 'cause I kinda go to school here?" the girl replied indignantly.

"I meant outside," El amended, cheeks flushing red. "Why are you alone?"

The girl shrugged. With a couple more bites, she finished off her sandwich and moved onto a bag of Red Vines. "I dunno," she replied, slipping the licorice in between her teeth, "It's nice out here. There's no annoying mouth-breathers."

El nodded, thinking back to her scornful classmates. "No mouth-breathers," she echoed.

"Hey," the girl took another Red Vine out of the package and held it out to her. "You want one?"

El smiled gratefully. She stepped up and onto the bleachers, taking

her seat beside the girl.

"I'm Max," the girl said, handing over the licorice.

"I'm El."

"El?"

"Like...Eleanor," El said carefully, remembering what Hopper had instructed her to say.

Max snorted. "That's so dorky."

El frowned a bit and looked away.

"But...I guess it's still better than *Maxine*."

El smiled. She glanced back up again and held back a giggle. "Maxine?"

"Yeah," Max replied with an eye roll, "Don't tell anyone, okay? It's so embarrassing."

"Okay," El replied, adamantly meaning it. She took a bite of the candy as the two girls stared at the empty soccer field together. The tangy sweetness of the licorice was addictingly delicious, and it wasn't long before Max was handing her a second Red Vine.

"So, how do you like it here so far?" Max asked, glancing over at her.

El hesitated. "I thought things would be different," she finally admitted, "I wanted...I thought I would fit in."

"Why?" Max asked incredulously.

"I want to be normal."

"Please." Max made a dismissive snort. "Being normal is lame."

El eyed her warily. "It is?"

"Totally. All those 'normal' kids all dress the same, talk the same, act the same, annoy me the same — it's just so boring."

"Boring," El echoed resolutely. By the amount of scorn Max used to describe the 'normal' kids, El realized that she definitely didn't want to be boring.

"Exactly," Max nodded, taking another bite of licorice, "So, like, don't feel bad about not fitting in. That's a good thing. That's what makes you cool."

"I'm cool?" El asked hopefully.

Max shrugged. "I mean, I don't really know you, but yeah, you seem cool."

El felt her shoulders sag in relief.

"Screw those other kids for acting like brain-dead morons around you," Max continued. "Like, screw all of them."

"Yes," El smiled, a new surge of confidence swelling within her, "Screw them."

---

When El awakes, her head is still ringing. She opens her eyes, but her vision is kinda blurry and everything looks like those posters of shapeless amoebas that hang on the walls of the Biology classroom.

*Biology...school...Mike...the party...*

El gives a small gasp and sits up in bed quickly, though immediately regrets it. The ringing in her head crescendos to a screeching halt and the sudden movement causes her head to pound. She winces, covering her face with her hands.

"You're up," a voice says.

The sudden noise causes El to flinch, which only makes her head hurt more, and she groans slightly.

*What the—?*

El carefully opens her eyes, blinking as she adjusts to her surroundings. She realizes that she's in Max's bed and still wearing

her party clothes from the night before. The lights are off and there's an old quilt draped over her. The clock on the nightstand reads 8:00 AM, though a quick glance out the window reveals that it's still a little dark outside.

Max is sitting at the edge of the bed dressed in an old set of pajamas, watching her. Her eyes are slightly bloodshot and her hair is a disheveled mess. She looks like she hasn't gotten much sleep.

"Max?" El asks. Her throat feels hoarse and she has to cough a couple times to clear it. "What happened? Are you ok?"

"Me?" Max laughs in disbelief, "Seriously? What about you?"

"Me?" El frowns.

"Are you okay after last night?"

"What happened last night?"

"You don't—?" Max stops, hesitates. Her gaze drifts away from El for a moment, and El can see her start to pick at the threads of the quilt "What do you remember?" She carefully asks.

El frowns and tries to focus as best as she can. Memories start to come back as static-filled images, jarring, fragmented.

*Jennifer's house. Music. Mike's face, coming in out of focus.*

"We went to the party," El says slowly, "And...Mike was there..."

Max watches her silently, a worried look on her face.

*Noise. Flashing. Falling.*

"And...I think...someone might have gotten hurt," El continues, "I'm not sure. There was a lot of yelling."

Max still isn't saying anything.

*And then...darkness.*

El starts to feel anxious. "Why can't I remember? Did something

happen?"

Max opens her mouth to reply only to shut it again a second later. She drags a hand through her loose hair, causing it to tangle even more at the ends. "It's...complicated, El."

"Max," El repeats, "What happened?"

Max swallows, takes a deep breath.

"Max!"

"I'm sorry, okay?!" Max finally bursts, "It's all my fault! We were at the stupid party and then some rando spilled a drink on me, so I went to the bathroom to clean myself off, and I left you alone! Then Greg McCorkle — you know, that one asshole senior? He gave you this drink or something, I don't know what was in it, but whatever it was, it was really bad. It totally messed you up, and you were acting all weird and drugged-up and spaced out. Then these two drunk wasteoids got in this fight and we almost got hurt, and then you accidentally used your powers!"

Max's impassioned ramble takes a minute to fully set in. As El begins to process all the words, a horrible, sickly feeling tightens her gut. "W-what?!" She asks, staring at Max unblinkingly. "I...I...used my powers? At the *party*?"

"Yeah," Max nods grimly. After speaking so quickly for so long, she sounds slightly out-of-breath. Despite this, she continues. "One of the guys that was fighting like, threw a lamp, and it was about to hit us, and you...you stopped it. Then the lights started flashing, and there was this noise, and then it was just...dark. All the power in the house went out, and then you passed out, and then Mike totally started freaking out because your nose was bleeding and you weren't moving or anything, but then I pulled you outside and Billy drove us back home."

"Mike?" El swallows thickly. Her hands start to shake, and she clenches them tightly. "He was there? He saw?"

"I'm not sure," Max hesitates, "But he might have. I mean, he saw a lot

of you. You were kind of hanging over him all night. Like...saying he was your best friend, and trying to cuddle him and stuff."

*No, no, no, no.*

The room starts to spin. El feels like passing out again. She remembers the last time she's ever felt this lonely, this *afraid*.

She was in 7th grade. It was an accident. She'd hadn't meant to use her powers in front of Max, but she'd just gotten so caught up in the excitement of spending time with a real friend, that she'd lost control. They were in Max's room, joking about something frivolous, and El accidentally laughed so hard, she'd fallen out of her seat...

...and levitated in place.

She hadn't meant to, but she had, and then Max started asking questions, and El had to answer them. Max, of course, promised that she'd never tell anyone, but that didn't stop the overwhelming sense of panic that set in afterward.

Later that day, when El returned home recounted this all to Hopper, he was furious.

"What did we talk about!?" He shouted, his voice so loud it made her ears ring. "You're *not* supposed to tell anyone!"

"I'm s-sorry!" El sobbed, nose running, voice hiccuping, eyes tear-filled. "I'm s-so s-sorry!"

She was afraid. Afraid of losing her only friend. Afraid that the bad men, somehow, would come back. That she'd lose her life as a normal kid just as she'd started to live it.

The fear had completely engulfed her, much like it was now.

Back then, Hopper had softened, pulled her into his arms, and held her until the tears stopped. He'd apologized for yelling, and El had promised to never tell anyone else.

Right now, even though Max is here, El feels that same overwhelming, isolating fear once more.

"Max!" She whispers, voice cracking, "I r-ruined e-everything! N-no one is s-supposed to know about m-my powers!"

"I don't know if they do," Max wavers, "Nobody was really looking at you when your powers went off. The lights were so bright and it was crowded and—" Her voice trails off, and her gaze falls towards her lap, "It was crazy."

The news doesn't make El feel much better. Even if her powers are still a secret, that doesn't change that she still completely embarrassed herself in front of everyone, in front of *Mike*. He's probably never going to speak to her again.

Her eyes start to sting, so El squeezes them shut tight and leans back against the headboard.

This is all my fault," Max mutters, looking forlorn, "I shouldn't have left you alone!"

"It's not your fault," El mumbles.

"It is! If I hadn't left you alone, you wouldn't have talked to him, and you wouldn't have gotten—" Her voice breaks off mid-sentence, and El suddenly notices how much it's shaking, *wavering*.

Max isn't a crier. When she gets upset, she glares, scowls, and yells. Out of their 4 years of friendship, El has never seen her shed more than a single tear. And yet, El knows that in this moment, Max is dangerously close. She doesn't want El to know it, but she is.

"Y-you got hurt and it was all because of me," Max continues, keeping her head low, hair obscuring her face from view. "It was my idea to go to the party, and I was the one who took us there, and—"

"Max!" El wipes the tears from her own eyes and crawls across the bed, enveloping her friend in a close hug. "It's not your fault."

Max doesn't hug El back but doesn't move away, either. "It is," she mumbles.

"It isn't," El negates. "You kept me safe."

Max is silent for a moment as she keeps her face rested on El's shoulder. "I just feel like a shit friend."

"You're my *best* friend."

Max gives a half-hearted snort. "Last night you said Mike was your best friend."

El feels her face heat up, but she tries to brush the feeling aside. "You are," She insists, "Not Mike."

"Well," Max says with a small sniff, and now her voice sounds a little hoarse too, "One of us better break it to Wheeler, then. Because I'm pretty sure he's off writing like, Star Wars-themed friendship vows, or something."

El giggles for the first time that morning. The feeling of just being able to laugh again rushes over her with a comforting reassurance and she finds that she can finally *breathe* again.

Max giggles too before pulling away. She tucks her hair behind her ears and El notices that her eyes are a little red from tears.

"God, look at us," Max sniffs again, wiping at her eyes quickly, "Crying like a pair of babies. Let's never do that again."

"Yeah," El nods, then pauses. "...Max?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't want to go to any more parties."

Max laughs shakily. "Agreed. That party was completely stupid anyway. It was just a bunch of wasted mouth-breathers."

El gives a faint smile at the use of the old, but never inaccurate, insult. "Yeah," she murmurs.

They fall silent for a moment. Outside, the sun is starting to rise. Its warm light gently peeks in through the windows, filling Max's bedroom with a soft glow.

"Well," Max says, letting out a slow, heavy sigh, "The good news is that it's just us right now. My parents went to that lame potluck and I don't know or care where Billy went."

"Ok."

"But!" Max adds, more excitedly, "I can make us breakfast! I asked my mom to buy some Eggos for us!"

"Really?" El perks up.

"Yeah!" Max nods, crawling out of bed. "I'll go get them ready."

El nods and follows her out of bed, but when Max heads to the kitchen, El goes into the bathroom.

She turns on the light and steps in front of the mirror, staring at her reflection scrutinizingly. Her mascara has smudged off, leaving black trails running down her cheeks. There's still a red blotch under her nose, the remnant of her nosebleed.

With a heavy sigh, El leans over the sink and washes it all away, scrubbing her skin until her face is left clean and raw.

The rest of the morning passes by easily. After washing her face, El changes into a simple t-shirt, denim jacket, and jeans, not wanting to stay in her party clothes any longer. Max and El watch TV and eat waffles on the living room couch until 10, when Hopper stops by to pick El up and bring her home.

"I'll see you tomorrow, ok?" Max says as she hugs El goodbye.

El only nods, grabs her bag, and follows Hopper out the door. While she was feeling better earlier, being around her dad is making her anxious all over again. She doesn't want to tell him about the party, and yet she's paranoid that he somehow already knows about it.

Despite the sunlight, it's still a typical, chilly October morning. El sees her breath fog in front of her as they walk, and the rising mist reminds her of the nicotine smoke plumes from last night.

She bites down on her lip.

They board the police cruiser.

"So, how was the sleepover?" Hopper asks as El buckles herself in.

"Fine," El mumbles, slumping back in her seat.

"Just fine?"

El nods.

Hopper eyes her. "What'd you girls do?"

El has to stop herself from snorting aloud. *If he only knew... "We listened to music,"* she mutters instead.

"All night?"

"Yeah. On...MTV."

"What kind of music?"

"Cyndi Lauper."

"You like Cyndi Lauper?"

El shrugs.

Hopper eyes her. "So that's it? You just listened to music?"

El nods.

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing," El repeats, not looking at him.

"Humph," Hopper snorts, but proceeds to start the car. The engine revs to life, the radio starts to play, and the cruiser backs out of Max's driveway.

As Hopper drives, El leans her head against the passenger's side window. The cool touch of the glass feels comforting in an odd sort of way, and she resigns herself to watching the trees as they pass by.

A few minutes pass before either of them speak again.

"Hey kid — I busted some of your classmates last night," Hopper says teasingly.

For a second, El feels her heart completely stop. "What?"

"Oh yeah," Hopper nods, sounding a little too smug about the whole thing, "At the Hayes' place? We gotta call at the station about a bunch of teenagers raising hell, starting fights, trashing the place. When we showed up to break it up, the whole house was a complete shit hole."

"Oh," El says quietly, keeping her gaze trained out the window.

"Apparently, it was some kind of big house party," Hopper continues, "A lot of high schoolers."

El stays silent.

"Did you hear about it? This party thing?" Hopper presses further.

El can feel his gaze on her back, but she doesn't turn to look at him. "No," she lies, keeping her eyes on the trees.

"Really? It seemed like everyone from your school must have been there."

El closes her eyes. "I don't know," she mutters, not quite sure what she's even supposed to be knowing in the first place.

"You don't know what?"

"Dad," El whispers, voice sounding strained, "I'm tired."

She knows he's eyeing her, studying her, and more than likely suspecting her, but nevertheless, Hopper relents. He lets the conversation drop and doesn't question her further, and El allows herself to relax once more.

The rest of the drive home is silent, accented only by the radio and the sounds of passing cars.

When they pull up in front of the house, Hopper walks El inside the house before he has to leave for work.

El takes her bag and starts to move towards the stairs, but Hopper stops her in her tracks.

"El," he says, and El stops because he'd used her *name* (not 'kid'), which always means that he has something important to say.

El turns and looks over her shoulder at him, meeting his gaze for the first time this morning. "Yes?"

Hopper pauses for a moment, studies her face. "You know...you know you can tell me anything, right?"

El blinks at him.

"I know I'm the sheriff, or whatever, but I'm also your dad. I don't want us to keep things from each other. I want...I just want you to trust me."

"I trust you," El says truthfully.

"So, if something was wrong, you'd tell me?"

El doesn't know if he knows or not. He's suspicious, at the very least, but El isn't eager to fess up. How would she even begin to explain it, how much she had completely, royally screwed up?

Her eyes start to water again as she questions how many times she's going to cry this morning. She wants to come clean, and yet, as Hopper's eyes soften, she has the feeling that he already knows.

She should tell him, but she can't.

Instead, El drops her bag, steps forward, and wraps her arms around Hopper in a close hug. Her nose buries itself into his chest, taking in the comforting scent of coffee and cigarettes.

Hopper hugs her back tightly, brow furrowed in concern. As El starts to shake, he raises a hand to cup the back of her slicked-back hair, gently smoothing down the many flyaways she's accumulated ever

since last night.

It's a silent answer and an unspoken reconciliation.

After what feels like forever, Hopper lets her go, tells that her everything's ok, promises that they'll talk more about this later, and leaves for work.

The house seems numbingly silent without him.

El grabs her bag and trudges up to her bedroom. She tosses her bag aside and flops onto her bed face-first, burying her face in her pillows.

Evidently, this proves to be a bad move, as El accidentally flops right onto the pillow that conceals her yearbook. The bulky object pushes up through the pillow and knocks against her head.

El sits up, rubbing her forehead with a scowl. She picks up the pillow and moves it out of the way, revealing the yearbook underneath.

She stares at it. It stares right back.

She knows she shouldn't, but old habits died hard, and screw it, she wants to see him.

She picks up the yearbook quickly, flipping to his page with practiced fingers.

His picture looks the same as it always does. Bright-eyes, a slightly awkward smile, a collared sweater, and wavy dark hair.

*Cute, cute, cute, cute.*

She's spent what's probably an absurdly unhealthy amount of time looking at this photo, hoping that one day he'd notice her, that he'd actually like her, despite how aloof and weird she was.

And then she had to go and screw everything up. She'd had her chance with him and lost it.

With a frown, El shuts the yearbook and hides it under her pillows

again.

The empty silence of the house makes itself known again, so El tries to distract herself. With a flick of her head, she turns on the TV, trying to find something to watch, but all the shows on are boring, considering that it's a Sunday afternoon. She next tries to listen to music, but that only makes the ringing in her head come back, and she starts to get a massive headache.

She trudges back downstairs to the bathroom medicine cabinet, retrieves a couple of aspirin, and moves into the kitchen to get a glass of water.

The kitchen is a mess, as it often is. Hopper hates doing dishes and consequently doesn't wash them until they run out of plates to eat off of. They're piled up in the sink and El can't help but shake her head in displeasure. A frying pan is left dirtied on the stove and the coffee pot is still filled with leftover coffee. The kitchen table still has an empty coffee cup on it, as well as a precarious stack of books, newspapers, and —

— the Yellow Pages.

El gets her water and takes the aspirin. As she swallows it down, her gaze lands on the yellow book.

She can hear Max's voice in her head, and it's infuriating.

*"Call him."*

*But—*

*"Are you really going to just keep moping around like a total bonehead or actually do something?"*

According to Max, Mike was worried about her. To be fair, if El had seen Mike pass out and start bleeding at the nose, she knew that she'd probably be losing it, too.

She doesn't want him to worry.

*"Then call him."*

El takes a deep breath.

She finishes off her water, sets the glass down in the shamefully messy sink, and grabs the Yellow Pages. Before she can talk herself out of it, she takes the book and runs back up to her room.

She sits on her bed, grabs her phone, and turns to the "W" page.

*Wheeler, Ted and Karen.*

For the second time, El dials the number with shaking fingers.

*Please don't hate me*, she mentally pleads, heart pounding in her chest.  
*Please, please, please don't hate me.*

The phone picks up on the third ring. El braces herself for another awkward introduction with his mom, but this time, it's Mike who answers.

"Hello?" He asks eagerly.

El wasn't ready to talk to him so soon. The fact that he answers takes her by surprise, and she momentarily has to remind herself how to breathe.

"Hi," She replies shakily.

"El!?" Mike gasps, "Is that you?"

El swallows. "Yes."

"Holy shit!" Mike exclaims, sounding shocked, "El! Are you okay? What happened last night? I was so worried about you! Like, I was up worrying all night! I wanted to call your house, but Max said that your Dad didn't know that you went to the party, so I didn't want to get you in trouble, or anything! After you left, it was so crazy, the cops showed up, I think your Dad was there, and we all had to take off. I wanted to bike to your house to check on you but I didn't know where you lived and Dustin said that would be kinda creepy, but I just wanted to make sure that you were okay and—"

He's impossibly considerate.

But he doesn't hate her.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Mike finishes, sounding worried.

El chokes back a laugh, feeling utterly relieved that Mike is even thinking about talking to her after everything that happened. "Yes, I'm okay," she says, voice shaky, "I...just...uh...got scared."

"It was really scary! No, it was like, totally insane, actually! Do you remember everything that happened?"

"Kinda."

"So, did you see what happened to the lights? And the lamp?"

*Shit.*

El's breath hitches. "The lamp?"

"It was *flying*," Mike says breathlessly, sounding awestruck, "I saw it! Right above my head! It came right at me and just *stopped!*"

El remains silent.

"I saw it happen, I know I did," Mike laments, "But I don't know if anyone else saw. They were all freaking out about the dumb lights."

"I don't know," El finally mumbles. "You might have been seeing things."

"I wasn't! I know what I saw! I'm not crazy!"

El falls silent again.

Mike does too.

For a moment, there's nothing but crackling white noise. Then, hesitantly, Mike asks, "You believe me, don't you?"

El swallows.

What is she supposed to say?

If she says yes, she'll be confirming that something weird happened at the party. She'll be spurring on more suspicion, more questions, more rumors.

If she says no, Mike will be heartbroken. He'll think that El is judging him or that she doesn't trust him, neither of which is true.

She doesn't want to call him a liar.

She doesn't want him to know she's a freak.

So what *does* she want?

"El?"

*Him.*

"I believe you," El replies, fingers clutching the receiver tighter.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Mike gives a relieved sort of laugh, and El can almost see the dorky grin he probably has on his face now. "*Thank you!* I told the other guys, but they didn't believe me! Lucas said I was probably wasted, but I wasn't! I wouldn't! Not while you were—"

His voice stops abruptly.

El frowns.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Mike groans, "I didn't mean..."

"It's okay, Mike," El assures him, "*I'm* sorry."

"...Wait, *what?* What are *you* sorry for?" Mike asks, sounding completely confused.

"For acting so..." El hesitates, "Stupid."

"You weren't acting stupid!" Mike protests, "The whole thing wasn't even your fault! That other guy, Greg, or whoever, was being an

asshole!"

"I guess," El admits, still feeling a little embarrassed.

"What kind of guy even tries to get girls drunk at parties?" Mike continues to rant, "Like, how messed up can you be? It's idiotic! You're like, the coolest girl ever and he shouldn't have done that to you! I should really get him back for doing it."

El tries to holds back a laugh. "What would you do to him?"

"I dunno," Mike admits, "I mean, I've never really been in a fight before, not a *real* one."

That isn't surprising to El in the slightest.

"I know!" Mike continues excitedly, "I could like, get him to buy test answers off of me, and then totally get him busted for cheating on a test!"

"Mike!" El exclaims, torn between laughter and indignation, "Then you'd get in trouble. Again."

"I don't care — it'd be worth it," Mike contends, "He deserves it!"

"Mike, it's okay," El insists, "Really."

In reality, it isn't. What happened to her at the party wasn't okay, but then again, most of what had happened to her growing up wasn't okay, either. Regardless, El knows that none of this is Mike's responsibility. She doesn't want it to be.

"Are you sure that you're ok?" Mike asks, "Like, are you *really* sure?"

"I'm sure."

"You promise?"

El flushes pink as she thinks back to their hallway conversation earlier that week. "I promise," she affirms.

Though they haven't known each other long, El knows that Mike

wouldn't lie to her. Though it's a simple word, 'promise' means something important, something special.

She might not be able to tell him everything about herself, but she can still promise to believe and trust in him.

It's not ideal. She hates keeping secrets. It feels like lying, and she doesn't want him to think she's a liar.

Regardless, for now, it's the best that she can do.

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[A/N]: So much angst! Don't worry, the next chapter will get much fluffier! Thanks for reading!

## 8. Study Buddies

Monday morning at Hawkins High, Jennifer Hayes' party is still the only thing that everyone's talking about. Everyone's whispering about how crazy the whole thing was. How you just had to be there. How, after the fight died down, the cops were called and all hell had broken loose again.

The cops hadn't been able to tell what caused the power outage, but they were able to arrest the underaged drunk kids that were stupid enough to stick around.

Evidently, they were also able to contact Mr. and Mrs. Hayes.

According to the rumors, Jennifer Hayes is now officially grounded until, like, college (news to which Will replies, voice completely flat, "Oh, no — no more parties").

Despite all that, the drama doesn't stop there.

Monday afternoon, word gets around that Greg McCorkle basically had a mental breakdown in the school parking lot. Apparently, someone, at some point during the day, spray-painted some pretty colorful language onto the side of his car — no pun intended.

During lunch, most students rush outside to see it for themselves. The chaos of the all the clamor makes it nearly impossible for Mr. Coleman, the principal, to even tell what's going on, let alone to start apprehending suspects — though, according to what he shouts as he tries to break up the crowded parking lot, he has 'a pretty good idea' who did it, he just has 'to prove it.'

"Do you think he really knows?" Will asks as the guys shuffle back inside. "Who did it, I mean."

"Nah, he's full of shit," Lucas scoffs.

"Almost as much shit as the ones written all over Greg McCorkle's car," Dustin quips, earning a gleeful round of snickers from his friends.

Later Monday afternoon, when school lets out, Mike still doesn't know who painted Greg's car.

At least, he doesn't until he starts to bike home.

Mike takes a shortcut around the back of the school, as it avoids the chaos of trying to bike through a crowded parking lot filled with asshole seniors and their dangerously fast cars.

As Mike comes around the back, he hears a noise: the sound of small objects knocking into metal, their rattle echoing.

He looks over and spots someone in a gray hoodie tossing a couple cans of spray paint into the giant dumpster behind the school. They're a little shorter than the dumpster, so they have to hop in place a little in order to successfully chuck the empty cans inside.

Mike frowns, bringing his bike to a skidding halt. He's seen that hoodie before.

The figure turns around at the screech of his bike tires, and even though she's standing several feet away, Mike recognizes Max at once.

Their eyes meet.

Mike's jaw drops.

Max freezes, one last empty spray-paint can still in hand.

Mike glances at her, the dumpster, the can of spray paint, and back at her again.

Well...it's not like it doesn't make perfect sense.

He keeps staring, unsure of what to do.

Max looks startled, scared even, and she throws him a pleading look.

Please don't tell.

Mike's mouth snaps shut and he quickly gives her a reassuring smile.

Never.

Max softens, smirks, and turns to toss the last can into the dumpster.

She turns back to look at him, they exchange a single, mutual nod, Mike bikes off, and neither speaks of the incident from that day forward.

Monday night at the Wheeler's, Mike still can't fall asleep. Then again, he hasn't really been able to since Saturday. Every time he closes his eyes, he's right back in Jennifer's suffocating, stiflingly hot living room. The fight breaks out, the lamp is thrown, and then it all comes to a screeching halt.

Over and over and over again.

Mike's eyes open. It's pitch black in his room, and, according to his digital alarm clock, well after midnight.

He tosses onto his side, trying to force himself to fall asleep, but it doesn't work. His mind just keeps going back to that lamp. He can't get the image of it — floating, defying everything that he knew about physics — out of his head.

The whole thing is just so weird and doesn't make any sense.

Mike tosses and turns for a few more moments before giving up. He crawls down from the top of his bunk bed and starts pacing around his room, trying to get his mind working.

There had to be some kind of explanation, right? Some rational, scientific reasoning?

But—

Why did it just HOVER before falling? Why were all the lights flashing? And what was that sound?

Mike drags a hand through his hair, frowning in frustration. It doesn't make sense. Nothing makes sense.

His gaze darts about his bedroom as he paces, as if he'll find the

answers to his questions hidden somewhere amongst old comic books and science fair trophies.

In a way, he does.

His eyes land on one of his most prized possessions, a framed commemorative poster for The Empire Strikes Back. His dad gave it to him for his 10th birthday, and even though Mike is sure that his mother played a big role in choosing the gift, it's reassuring to know that there was at least one point in time in which his father acknowledged his interests.

But when Mike looks at the poster now, he's not thinking about his dad.

The Force.

Okay, so, of course, Mike knows that the Force technically isn't real. But what if what had happened at the party was supernatural in some other way? What if it was beyond scientific understanding?

Mike's eyes widen as he considers this further. His pacing stops as he freezes in place, mind officially blown.

Holy shit.

He has to investigate this. He has to. But how? He needs help.

His gaze moves to his nightstand. The completed Rubik's cube is still resting there, just as he'd left it weeks ago.

He knows exactly who'll understand.

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"Sorry guys, but I'm going to have to call off A.V. for today," Mike tells the guys over lunch.

"But we always have A.V. Club on Tuesdays," Will frowns, looking concerned, "Is everything ok?"

"Yeah, everything's ok!" Mike insists, "I just...uh..."

"You just what?" Lucas asks.

"Uh..."

"Give him a minute," Dustin smirks, "He's gotta think of an excuse first."

"I'm not making excuses!" Mike insists. He hesitates as he contemplates what to say, but then, remembering his cardinal rule, decides that he shouldn't lie to his friends. "I have to go to the library after school."

"Why?!" Lucas exclaims, brow furrowed in confusion.

Mike shrugs. "To study."

"Study what?"

As much as Mike values honesty, he's not opposed to sometimes, when necessary, leaving out small details. Details that, if shared, would make his friends tease him for the rest of the day. Rest of the year, actually.

Said details included that he was going to the library to study supernatural activity with El Hopper (who he may or may not have a crush on).

"Stuff for science," Mike explains, which isn't a lie, not really.

"Like what?" Dustin asks.

"Physics."

"You're in Biology," Will points out.

"Well, I want to study physics!"

"Why?" Dustin counters.

"For fun!"

"Whatever, man," Lucas says, shaking his head. "But we need to stop slacking off. We still have to finish our Homecoming project,

remember?"

At the beginning of the year, before Mr. Coleman busted them for selling test answers, he approached the A.V. Club with a request. He wanted them to make a promotional video for the homecoming football game that featured highlights from past seasons.

"If it's good enough, we might even submit it to the local news!" He gushed excitedly.

The boys eagerly accepted the project. Considering that they had to fight to be featured in the yearbook last year, they were desperate for recognition. Plus, as Lucas had eagerly pointed out, Troy would totally lose his shit if something they made was featured on the news.

Now, it's over a month later and, after long hours of sorting through endless film reels of nothing but football, the boys' passion for the project is pretty much shot. The homecoming football game is only two weeks away, and yet they still haven't even come close to finishing.

"I know," Mike frowns, "We'll finish it, I promise!"

"The news, Mike," Dustin says, slapping a hand down on the lunch table for emphasis, "The. News. We're going to be famous!"

"We're not even going to be in it," Will reminds him.

"Still! Everyone will see it, and then we can tell them that we made it, and then we'll be famous."

"Not if we don't finish it," Lucas reiterates.

"We will!" Mike repeats, "How about we meet tomorrow instead? Does that work?"

The other three all glance at each other before nodding approvingly.

"As long as we get it done," Will shrugs.

"Alright, tomorrow then," Mike says definitively. In retrospect, he could have easily kept the A.V. Club meeting and gone to the library

tomorrow...

...but that would just mean another sleepless night spent tossing and turning over answers he didn't quite have. He needs to figure things out now, before he completely loses his mind.

The conversation concludes with the ring of the school bell. As lunch ends, the cafeteria becomes a flurry of activity. The guys pack up their lunches and go their separate ways, each headed off to their 6th-period classes.

Even though Mike knows that he's going to see El in Biology, he wants to ask her before class starts — mainly because he's scared he'll lose his nerve otherwise.

Even though the school hallways are as crowded as usual, Mike is still able to spot El. He recognizes her hair, slicked back as always, curling at the ends. She's wearing the same flannel shirt that she wore when they first met in detention, though she has a different band tee paired with it.

He hasn't talked to her since their phone conversation on Sunday, a conversation that he's admittedly played back in his head several times. It hadn't lasted long — after El promised him that everything was okay, the conversation ended with a few offhand questions about their upcoming Biology assignments.

But still. They'd had time to talk, just the two of them, without his friends attempting to embarrass him in the background. And now, hopefully, they'll get a second chance.

He sees her walk to her locker and start turning the padlock.

He takes a deep breath, readying himself.

Paladin, he reminds himself, trying to bolster his own confidence. He's a leader. El believes in him.

With that in mind, Mike walks over to her, trying to look as casually suave as he can. El doesn't see him approaching and even when he comes to a stop beside her locker, she's still distracted with getting out her books.

Mike clears his throat. "Uh, hey!"

El glances up before jumping back slightly, looking startled. "Mike!"

"I'm sorry!" Mike apologizes hastily, taking a step back. "I didn't mean to scare you!"

"You didn't scare me," El blushes, not looking directly at him.

"Well, that's good!" Mike replies, his own cheeks starting to turn pink. "I just...uh..."

"What?" El asks, gaze meeting his. Her eyes look so much larger when they're surrounded by the black eyeshadow she always wears. It makes her stare a little intimidating.

"I wanted to ask you something?" Mike asks, hating how pitchy his voice gets towards the end of the sentence. He can't help it. He's nervous. It doesn't help that he can't quite read her facial expression, either. He can't tell if she's nervous, suspicious, angry, or curious.

"Okay?"

"Okay," Mike echoes, taking another steady breath.

He hesitantly steps closer to her. El's eyes widen slightly, but she doesn't step back. Instead, she follows his lead and leans in, cheeks bright pink.

"So, do you remember how we were talking about what happened at Jennifer's house?" Mike asks, voice low, "With the lamp?"

"Yes?" El whispers back.

"Well, I was thinking about it over the past couple days, and the whole thing just doesn't add up, right?"

"Right," El echoes nervously.

"Well, I was thinking that maybe, it was like, something...something..."

El eyes him. "Something...?"

"Supernatural," Mike finishes hastily.

"Supernatural?"

"Yeah, you know, like paranormal," Mike explains. "It means that it goes against the laws of nature, or normality."

"I know what it means," El defends, "I just...why are you telling me?"

"Because you're the only one that believes me!" Mike reminds her, "All my other friends think that I was just seeing things."

"But you...weren't," El says carefully.

"Exactly! But I need to prove it! I wanna do some research and see if I can dig up any more information about stuff like this. You know, like weird stuff."

"Oh."

"Yeah! So, I was hoping, that maybe, if you're free, we could go to the library after school today?" Mike asks, voice getting a little pitchy again. It's starting to get embarrassing how nervous he sounds. "I mean, only if you want to, that is. I just thought it'd be nice to have someone else there to help and talk things through with."

El hesitates. "I'm not sure," she says, looking away.

"Please?" Mike pouts, giving her what was hopefully his best puppy-dog eyes.

El blushes. "I guess so," she relents shyly.

"Awesome!" Mike grins. "Why don't you meet me at the bike rack after school gets out?"

"Okay," El nods, cheeks still pink.

The warning bell rings and Mike realizes he doesn't have any supplies for Biology yet.

"Aw, shit," he groans, "I gotta run to my locker, but I'll see you in class, okay?"

"Okay!" El repeats, and once again, he can't quite read whether or not she's excited or anxious. Maybe it's a combination of both.

Either way, she agreed to spend time with him, and that alone has Mike beaming with excitement.

She said yes. She said yes and she believed him and she's like, the coolest girl ever. He can barely believe it.

The last two classes of the day pass by in a blur. Mike spends most of them watching the clock, counting down the seconds until school lets out. When it finally does, he hurriedly packs up his things and races outside to the bike rack, not wanting to accidentally miss El.

His friends stop by to pick up their own bikes, Will to recommend some good physics books he's heard of, and Dustin and Lucas to warn him to not get too invested in any "weird shit."

A few minutes after they leave, El exits the school and approaches Mike.

At this point, it's not surprising in the slightest that Mike's heart starts doing cartwheels. He realizes that it's a feeling he's just going to have to get used to.

"Hey, El!" Mike says excitedly as she approaches him.

"Hi, Mike," El murmurs, giving him a small smile.

"So, are you ready to go?"

"Go?"

"To the library?"

"Isn't that right here? At school?"

"I was thinking," Mike replies, flustered, "That we could go to the public library. I don't think our school has enough books on

supernatural stuff."

"How are we going to get there?" El asks, confused.

Mike starts to blush. "I was...uh...thinking that I could bike us there?"

El blinks at him.

Oh, god. She probably thinks he's a total wasteoid. What kind of dweeb still rode a bike around, anyway? He can't even drive and now El probably thinks he's completely lame for it. Why was this a good idea again?

"Or not," Mike mutters, looking down at his feet, "I dunno, I'm sorry. I was just being weird."

"No!" El pipes up quickly.

Mike looks back up in surprise. "No?"

"You're not weird," El explains, "I just didn't know." She moves closer to him, stopping only when she's standing right before him.

If Mike had thought that Jennifer Hayes had this otherworldly aura, it's nothing compared to how El makes him feel. It's ridiculous, really, considering that she was hanging onto him for most of Saturday night, but nevertheless, when she comes to stand in front of him and cocks her head up to meet his eye, he's completely awestruck.

"Let's go," El says.

"Um," Mike replies stupidly.

El gives him a confused look, which is enough to make Mike snap out of it.

"Yes!" He bursts, blushing bright pink. "I mean, yeah, let's get going."

He turns and mounts his bike, then pats the back of the seat, inviting El to get behind him.

She does. It's a tight fit, especially since they're both wearing

backpacks and Mike's bike is already on the smaller side, but they manage to make it work. As she situates herself on the seat behind him, her torso presses into him, her arms wrap around his sides, and her fingers curl into the sleeves of his navy windbreaker. Being that he's a few inches taller than her, their size difference is noticeable even when sitting. Her head comes to a stop around his neck area, so when she speaks, her voice sounds slightly muffled.

"Ready!" She announces.

Mike nods, pretty much unable to speak at the moment. He takes off biking, making sure to keep a good balance.

The bike ride is mostly quiet, but it's not an uncomfortable silence. Quite the opposite, actually. Having El snuggled up beside him is definitely the most comfortable feeling in the world. Did thinking that make him a weirdo? Probably.

The ride doesn't take long, and within 15 minutes they come to a stop in front of the Hawkins public library.

"Sorry we had to bike," Mike apologizes as he dismounts the bike, "Next summer, I'm gonna get my license and save up for a car."

El gets off the bike too, tucking a strand of wind-swept hair behind her ear. "I liked the bike," she mumbles shyly.

"Really?" Mike gapes.

El shrugs.

"Oh," Mike blushes, "Well, that's good, I guess."

El smiles at him, which only causes him to blush even more. When he manages to speak again, his voice sounds embarrassingly hoarse.

"Well, let's go inside," He instructs.

"Right," El replies, face falling slightly.

Mike leaves his bike tucked between some bushes before leading the way up the front steps of the library. He makes sure to dash ahead

and grab the door first, holding it open for El.

"Thank you," El replies, though she only seems partly aware of what's going on. She's completely captivated by the impressive architecture of the library. Her gaze keeps darting about sporadically, taking it all in.

"You're welcome," Mike modestly replies anyway.

When they enter the library, they're met with the distinguished smell of old wood and books that's somehow both comforting and unpleasantly musty at the same time. Their sneakers squeak against the checkered tiled floor. This causes the librarian, seated front and center at the main desk, to look up at them, perturbed. When she recognizes Mike, however, she softens.

"Michael!" She smiles, voice hushed. "How good to see you!"

"Hey, Marissa," Mike smiles back.

"I see you brought a friend with you," Marissa remarks, looking over to El.

"Oh, yeah," Mike replies, turning to El, "This is El Hopper, she's my...uh...my—"

Somehow, 'crush' doesn't seem to be the appropriate response here. Thankfully, El steps in for him.

"Friend," She finishes, and Mike nearly dies of happiness right then and there.

Friend. They're friends. She said it and they're friends.

"Yeah!" Mike replies eagerly, "We're friends!"

"Aren't you the Chief's daughter?" Marissa asks, looking El over.

"Yes," El nods.

"Huh," Marissa replies simply. She keeps giving El the look-over, and Mike can't tell if it's a good or bad thing. Either way, he and El have

business to attend to.

"Do you guys have any historical texts on any paranormal or supernaturally significant phenomena?" Mike says, trying to sound as professional as possible. In reality, he's just throwing in as many buzzwords from Ghostbusters as possible.

Marissa eyes him. "Check the records," she offers, motioning to the long row of filing cabinets to her left. "Maybe we'll have something."

"Thanks!" Mike grins.

Marissa nods and brings a finger to her lips, reminding him to stay quiet.

Mike and El walk over to the filing cabinet. It's quite massive in scale — at least 9 compartments tall by 12 wide. Each drawer is filled with filing notes on old newspapers articles, sorted by topic and publication.

As Mike begins to scan the label of each compartment, El leans in close to him.

"How do you know her?" She whispers, glancing back at the librarian.

"Marissa?" Mike asks, to which El nods. "I've known her forever. I've been coming here since I was a kid. The guys and I like to do research for our Dungeons and Dragons campaigns here. We like to make sure they're like, super historically accurate."

"What's Dungeons and Dragons?"

"It's a tabletop RPG," Mike explains.

El's brow furrows in confusion.

"Like, a board game," Mike explains patiently, "Where you play as a character and get to make your own stories and stuff."

"Oh," El smiles understandingly, "That sounds fun."

"Yeah, it's pretty cool," Mike brags, "I'm the Dungeon Master, so I plan

a lot of campaigns. My best one took over 10 hours to finish, it was so sweet! It took forever to plan though. I had to spend a lot of time here, to make sure all my historical weaponry was accurate and everything. Sometimes the guys come here with me and we just spend the whole day reading about random stuff."

"I've never been here before," El admits, glancing around.

"You've never been to the library before!?" Mike exclaims in astonishment.

El shrugs.

"How is that even possible!?"

Marissa looks up from her desk to give Mike a warning shush.

Mike and El give her apologetic smiles before turning back to each other.

"Seriously, how have you never been here?" Mike whispers.

"My Dad gets me all my books," El whispers back, "And I don't read a lot."

"What do you do for fun, then?" Mike asks curiously.

El thinks for a moment. "Max and I listen to music. We go to the records store a lot. Sometimes we watch movies and TV."

"What kinds of movies?"

El hesitates. "Halloween."

"Isn't that movie really scary?"

El nods. She glances around the library nervously before leaning in closer to Mike. "I hate it," she whispers, "But don't tell Max."

The whole thing reminds Mike of El's previous Star Wars confession, and he can't help but smile.

"Okay, so, what kinds of movies do you like, then?" He asks teasingly,

raising an eyebrow.

El bites down her on lower lip and glances up at him shyly. "Don't laugh," she warns him.

"I won't!" Mike assures her.

"I like...." El replies, voice mumbled, "Sixteen Candles."

"Sixteen Candles?!"

"...And the Breakfast Club."

"The Breakfast Club!?"

Marissa shushes them again, so Mike and El lower their voices.

"What?" El asks, looking worriedly at him.

"It's nothing!" Mike insists, "I just...I didn't know you liked that kind of stuff. Like, romance stuff."

"Why wouldn't I?" El inquires curiously.

"Because," Mike hesitates, "I mean, like, just based on what most people think of you."

"What they think of me?"

"Like, how you fit into the high school hierarchy," Mike explains, though as soon as Dustin's coined phrase leaves his mouth, Mike realizes how stupid he's starting to sound.

"The hierarchy?" El echoes, brow furrowed.

Yeah, this was turning into a disaster. Mike decides to salvage the situation as best as he can by changing the subject.

"You know what, never mind, actually," Mike quickly amends, "I don't know what I'm talking about."

El gives him a small, albeit slightly confused, smile. "Okay."

"Let's just start looking for information," Mike instructs, turning his attention back to the filing cabinet. "Why don't you start looking through the Chicago Tribune, and I'll take the New York Times?"

"Okay," El mumbles, looking a little uncomfortable.

They sort through the files together. Mike pulls out anything that could even be loosely related to paranormal activity, no matter how insignificant or mundane it seems. El pulls out a few things here and there, but not many.

"Did you find anything good, yet?" Mike whispers to her as he moves onto the New York Post.

"No," El replies quickly, shutting the compartment for the Tribune. "Just boring stuff."

Mike eyes her. He can't help but feel like she's acting a little weird. Jumpy, even. But a moment later, she's giving him a reassuring smile, coming over to help him sort through the Post, and any uneasy feeling of his is forgotten.

They pull as many files as they can. Because Marissa knows Mike so well, she knows that he's a 'responsible young man with a good head on his shoulders.' Consequently, she allows the two to use the microfilm readers to examine the articles.

The readers are located in a quiet corner in the back of the library, secluded from the other patrons. Mike and El push two chairs together and get situated in front of one reader. One by one, they start going over all of the newspaper articles they picked out, eyes straining to read the inverted text.

Mike is desperate for answers, but the newspaper articles come up blank every time. It's mostly a lot of tall tales and exaggerated 'eye-witness' accounts that add up to nothing more than flashy headlines.

El stays silent for most of the time, slumped back in her seat. She's wearing her blue braided bracelet again, and as Mike quietly reads off articles to her, she absentmindedly turns it in circles around her wrist.

"I can't find anything," Mike scoffs after a long period of time. "It's all nonsense."

"Maybe we should stop," El offers.

"No! We can't stop!" Mike insists, turning to look at her.

"Why not?"

"Because! I need answers. We need answers. There was something strange that happened at that party, I just know it. The cops couldn't figure out what caused the power outage — don't you think that's weird?"

"I don't know," El mumbles.

"It is!" Mike continues, "People blow fuses all the time, that shouldn't be hard to figure out, and yet they couldn't! They don't know! They don't know because it's something they've never seen before, something that no one has!"

"Like what?" El asks, starting to sound agitated. Her brow is furrowed as she gives him a serious glare. "What, Mike?"

"I don't know!" Mike exclaims, "Something beyond scientific explanation! Something paranormal, or supernatural, or telekinetic, or—"

"Stop."

Mike looks at her indignantly. "Stop? Why?"

"Just stop!" El repeats. She takes a hesitant breath, suddenly sounding more frightened than angry.

Mike pauses, giving her a worried look. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" El insists.

"Then why do you look upset?"

El shakes her head. "I'm not."

"Okay, well, you obviously are."

"I just—" El stops herself and pauses for a moment, "I don't think it's worth it."

"What isn't worth it?"

El motions to the microfilm reader. "All this research for something you might not have really seen."

"Might not have really seen?" Mike repeats, heart sinking. "I thought you said that you believed me!"

"I do!" El insists.

"It doesn't sound like it!"

"I'm sorry!"

"So, which is it then? Do you believe me or not?"

El takes a sharp breath. Her eyes close, and for a moment Mike wonders if something is seriously wrong, but then she releases her breath and turns to look at him.

"I...I believe you, Mike," she says slowly.

"Really?" Mike asks suspiciously.

El nods. She carefully reaches out to place her hand over his, and he's pretty sure that his brain short circuits for a moment. With a gentle push, she moves his hand away from the microfilm reader. "It's just...the party was bad, Mike. Really bad. I...I don't want to remember it. Do we have to talk about it all the time?"

Mike instantly feels like an idiot.

El had just lived through what was probably the worst night of her life, and all that Mike had done for the past three days is constantly remind her of it. No wonder that she's looked so uncomfortable this whole time!

"Oh my god," Mike groans, moving away from her touch. He slumps back in his chair, desperately wishing he could just disappear. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," El replies quietly.

"No, it isn't!" Mike laments, "It isn't! That party must have been terrible for you, and I just keep talking about it, and making you think about it, and just being a total moron about it!"

"It's not your fault."

"Still!"

Before El can respond, she's cut off by the sound of clinking heels against the tiled floor. The two glance up to see Marissa storming over to them, looking absolutely livid.

"You two!" She snaps, hissing furiously, "What is it with all the noise?!"

Mike shrinks back in his seat. "I'm sorry!" He apologizes earnestly. "We got carried away!"

"I'm very disappointed in you, Michael," Marissa scolds, "You know better than to make a commotion in here, and yet, I could hear you two going back and forth all the way from the front desk!"

"I'm sorry!" Mike says again. He's not sure what else he can say.

Marissa lets out an angry huff of air before taking a deep breath. She straightens up, composes herself, and gives them both warning glares. "Keep it down," she says gravely.

"We will!" Mike nods, "We promise!"

Marissa only gives him another serious look before turning on her heel and marching back to the front desk.

Mike waits for her to leave before turning back to El.

"That was terrifying," he jokes, keeping his voice low.

"I should go," El murmurs in response, not looking at him, "It's getting late."

Oh.

Mike's shoulders slump as he feels an overwhelming sense of defeat. He glances out the window and is surprised to see that it is pretty late — the blue sky is fading into a deep purple hue as the streetlights flicker on. They've been here longer than he thought.

"Okay," Mike mumbles. He turns to glances over at El anxiously. "Do you want me to bike you home?"

"It's okay," El deflects. She stands up from their table and slips her backpack over her shoulder. "My house isn't far."

"Are you sure? It's kinda dark."

She nods. "I'm fine."

Mike frowns worriedly. "Alright, then."

El gives him a somber, half-hearted smile. "Bye, Mike."

Mike just nods.

She leaves then, sneakers still squeaking against the floor until she exits the building.

He's left alone, surrounded by microfilm files, face illuminated by the glow of the reader's screen.

Though he's not sure what, he knows that he's definitely screwed something up.

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On Wednesday, the guys host a make-up A.V. Club meeting. As always, they meet in what has to be the smallest room at Hawkins High. The space just barely fits their film equipment, repair tools, projectors, TV, landline phone, and four desks that they'd "borrowed" from other classrooms. It's so cramped that the room often feels like a glorified closet than anything else, but regardless, it's theirs.

Today, the desks are situated around the TV. A recording of the Hawkins High homecoming game of '81 is playing on the screen. It has to be the millionth VHS tape of football footage that the guys have watched — consequently, they're all slumped back in their seats disinterestedly.

Mike is trying to remain focused, but it's all so boring. It also doesn't help that he can't stop worrying about El. She hadn't looked his way once during Biology today, and after class had ended, she'd taken off in a hurry.

Mike had considered asking Max if everything was okay, but that seemed a little too forward. Plus, despite the moment they'd shared Monday, he was 99% certain that if he whined to Max about whether or not El was mad at him, Max would laugh right in his face.

The whole thing is so complicated and confusing. Mike's not sure what he should do about the whole situation, so he instead focuses his attention on something he does understand — A.V.

"Maybe we can use this clip," Mike says tiredly. He leans forward, reaches out across his desk, and presses pause on the TV. "I think that might have been a good play."

"Everyone started cheering," Will remarks, idly drawing in his sketchbook. "So, that means it has to be good, right?"

"Who cares?" Lucas sighs, "Let's just use it! I just want this project to be over already."

"Why do we have to put in so many highlights?" Dustin gripes. He removes his hat with one hand and uses the other to drag his fingers through his hair. "It's all the same. One guy passes the ball to the other, the other guy runs with it, they score a point. It's all the same and it just doesn't make any goddamn sense."

"Well, we're almost done," Will reminds them, "We only need three more minutes of footage."

"Did you guys know that with all the time we've spent watching these football tapes over the past month, we could have watched the entire

"Star Wars trilogy over three times?" Dustin points out, "Three times."

"That can't be right," Lucas frowns, shaking his head.

"7 homecoming games, all over 3 hours each, versus 3 movies, all around 2 hours each. Do the math, I'm right."

"You do the math!" Lucas grumbles crossly.

"I just did!"

"We should take a break," Will suggests, turning to Mike hopefully.

"Agreed," Mike nods, rubbing his forehead, "I think we're all pretty tired."

"And hungry," Dustin adds, "I'm super hungry."

"Then go home and eat!" Lucas mutters bitterly.

"No!" Dustin frowns, scrunching up his nose, "Do you wanna know what my mom's making for dinner tonight? Tuna casserole. Tuna casserole, Lucas. No one likes that, it's disgusting."

"Some people do."

"Who?! Name one person."

Lucas opens his mouth to reply, only to close it a second later.

"Exactly," Dustin says triumphantly.

"Then why don't you go out and eat," Lucas retorts.

"Because! No one goes out to eat alone, that's weird."

"It really isn't!"

"It really is!"

"Then we'll just go with you!" Will cuts in, "It's not that big of a deal."

"Really?" Dustin asks, looking excited.

"Really?" Lucas echoes, looking tired.

"It could be fun," Will nods, "Right, Mike?"

Mike glances between the guys. Even though he's still feeling a little down, a night out with his friends does seem like the perfect way to get his mind off of El.

"Why not?" He shrugs, turning off the TV. "We still have two weeks to finish this video, and it's getting pretty late. We can go to Benny's."

"Mike, Will — you're amazing, incredible," Dustin beams, already rising out of his seat. "I owe you guys! You've saved me, like, seriously!"

"That's what friends do!" Will replies before turning to give Lucas a pointed look.

Lucas eyes Will and Dustin before allowing his shoulders to slump and his demeanor to soften. "Yeah," he relents, offering Dustin an apologetic smile.

Mike smiles at his friends, already feeling happier. "Alright, guys, let's get going before it gets dark out," he instructs, getting out of his desk.

The guys nod and follow his lead. After they hastily pack up their equipment and phone their parents, they race each other outside to the bike rack. It's around 6:00 when they finally head out. Dusk is upon them — the blue sky is slowly ebbing away into a faint orange, their breath appears as faint clouds in front of their faces.

Benny's Burgers, located near the outskirts of town, is small and a little drab, but the boys wouldn't trade it for the world. They've been coming to the diner ever since they were young. The food is not only cheap, but amazing, and the owner, Benny, is always really nice to them. It's also nice that it's not too far away. Tonight, the boys manage to bike there in under 25 minutes.

25 more minutes later, they're seated inside their favorite booth, happily enjoying their bounty of burgers, curly fries, and milkshakes. They sit in their usual positions — Dustin and Lucas on one side, Mike and Will on the other. Dustin and Will are seated closest to the

windows; Dustin because he enjoys people-watching, and Will because he enjoys sketching the scenery when he gets bored.

There are only a few other patrons in the restaurant, but they're more preoccupied with chatting up the owner, Benny, as he works behind the grill. The diner is filled with the sounds of frying food, soft chatter, clattering dishes, and whatever song is playing on the radio (currently: a single from the new A-ha album).

Just like the A.V. Club room, Benny's is a place that means something to Mike and his friends. It's safe, it's comfortable, it's filled with memories, and it's always the same.

It's the perfect way for Mike to get his mind off of El.

At least, it is until she shows up.

"Holy shit!" Dustin suddenly cries out, peering out the window, "Is that El and Max?"

Mike nearly chokes on his curly fries. "W-what?!"

"I'm serious! I'm like, a hundred percent sure that that's them," Dustin continues, squinting.

"I wanna see!" Lucas says eagerly, pushing past Dustin.

The boys all cram together to look out the window, faces pressed up against the glass.

Sure enough, Mike spots El and Max in the parking lot. They're approaching the diner at an easy pace, skateboards tucked under their arms.

"They skateboard?" Dustin exclaims, shocked.

"They're so cool!" Lucas gushes, before quickly adding, "I mean, sort of."

Had it been any other day, Mike probably would have been absurdly excited to see that they were here. But today, still unsure of how El feels towards him, all he feels is anxiety. For all he knows, El is never

going to speak to him again, all because he wouldn't shut up about a stupid lamp. It sucks.

"I can't believe your girlfriend is here, Mike," Dustin snickers giddily, "Try not to cream your pants."

"She's not my girlfriend," Mike mutters, pouting slightly. The A-ha song that's playing on the radio is a somber love ballad, which really isn't helping Mike's mood.

El is chatting with Max when she suddenly stops. Max looks back at her with confusion, but then El says something and points to a spot in the front of the diner.

The exact same spot where the boy's bikes are parked.

Max frowns and glances around the parking lot. Then her eyes flit towards the window, she nudges El, and the next thing Mike knows, both girls are staring directly at them.

Shit, shit, shit.

"Oh my god, get down!" Dustin exclaims, eyes wide.

The boys jump back from the window and duck their heads down, each a little breathless and flustered.

"Shit, do you think they saw us!?" Lucas hisses, not daring to look back out the window.

"They looked right at us!" Dustin hisses back, "I'm pretty sure they did!"

"So? Aren't we friends with them?" Will asks, glancing at everyone. "We all hung out at the party!"

"That was only because everyone else was drunk!" Lucas reminds him, "And Max specifically said that we weren't friends!"

"I don't think she really meant that."

"It doesn't matter, we can't get caught looking like creeps!" Mike

insists, quickly straightening up, "Just act normal! Maybe they didn't recognize us!"

The boys nod and follow his lead, resuming their normal seating positions.

As they all return to eating, Mike can feel his heart pounding in his chest. The drumming of his heartbeat is so loud, he's surprised that all his friends can't hear it. Wait. Maybe they can. Maybe they're just not mentioning it. Oh god, what if it's like, really loud, and then El walks in and she totally hears it and she knows how much he's freaking out and—

His thoughts are abruptly cut off by the soft chime of the bell that hangs above the entryway door. He can hear two sets of footsteps enter, and then come closer, and then he can see Lucas' eyes widening, and Mike's palms are starting to sweat, and shit, this is really happening.

He glances up nervously to see Max and El walking up to the table. Max's head is held high with confidence, while El's is ducked down shyly.

"Sup, nerds," Max says casually, coming to a stop in front of the table. Without hesitation, she slides right into Lucas and Dustin's side of the booth and gives Lucas a punch to the arm. "Hope you don't mind that we left our boards by your bikes."

Lucas tries to laugh, but it comes out as nothing more than a nervous voice-crack.

Mike and El's gazes meet.

She looks nervous, but then again, Mike knows that he does too. He's more than nervous, actually, he's terrified.

But then El gives him a small, soft smile, and Mike feels his heart melt because she's so pretty and she's smiling at him, which means that she probably doesn't hate him for acting like a total wasteoid, right? Se forgives him.

Mike doesn't realize that he's been stupidly, wordlessly gazing at her

this entire time until Will intervenes.

"Let her sit down," he whispers, giving Mike a small nudge.

Oh. Right.

"D-Do you want to?" Mike hesitantly asks El.

El blushes. "I-

"She does," Max answers, "Believe me."

El throws Max a dirty look before turning back to Mike and nodding appreciatively. "Yes."

Will and Mike slide over in the booth, allowing El to squeeze in next to Mike. It's a close fit and Mike can't help but blush when her leg presses up against his.

"Thanks," El murmurs to Mike.

"You're welcome!" Mike mumbles back.

"So, um," Dustin says, slightly squished up against the window, "Like, no offense, but why are you guys here?"

"Like, no offense," Max replies, mimicking him, "But why were you stalking us?"

"We weren't stalking you!" Lucas insists.

"Then why were you all looking out the window at us?"

The guys glance at each other anxiously.

"There was..." Will begins slowly.

"A..." Lucas adds.

"A really big..." Mike continues.

"Lizard," Dustin finishes.

"A lizard?!" Everyone else echoes.

"Yeah!" Dustin continues quickly, throwing the guys a scowl. "A really big, killer lizard. Like, bigger than my head! It was running through the grass, and I spotted it, and I just thought I that I should point it out to the guys, because it looked really cool. We totally didn't know that you girls were even there."

It takes everything within Mike to not slap himself on the forehead.

Shockingly, the girls don't buy it.

"Remind me to never commit a crime with you guys," Max remarks. She reaches a hand across the table, steals a curly fry from Lucas' basket, and starts munching away happily. "You guys are the worst liars ever."

"Whatever," Lucas blushes, sliding the basket of fries closer to her.

"So, uh, you guys never said why you were here?" Mike says conversationally.

"Max is teaching me to skateboard," El explains. She tilts her neck back and points to a small, but rough-looking scrape along the underside of her chin.

"Sweet!" Dustin says, impressed.

"Are you ok?" Mike asks worriedly.

El nods modestly. "It didn't hurt."

"Anyway," Max chimes in, still working on Lucas' fries, "We got hungry, so we skated here."

"You guys like it here too?" Will asks.

"It's alright," Max shrugs. She reaches into Lucas' basket for another curly fry, only to discover that she's eaten them all. "Shit," she mutters, frowning at the empty basket.

"Maybe," Dustin says, "You should order your own food."

Max flips him off. Dustin returns the motion. At first, Mike worries that an argument is going to break out between them, but to his surprise, their angered looks break into mutual snickering, and both look away with a smirk.

Alright, then.

"I'm hungry," El admits. Her leg is still pressed against Mike's, and as she talks, he can feel that she's drumming her foot on the floor.

"You should order some food," Mike insists to both girls, though his gaze remains mostly fixated on El.

"Fine," Max sighs. She reaches across the table and grabs the menu that's tucked behind a bottle of ketchup and the salt and pepper shakers. "What should I get?" She asks, giving Lucas a pointed look.

"What do you like?" Lucas asks, still blushing furiously.

"You," El mumbles, so low that only Mike is able to hear it.

Mike lets out a bark of laughter, earning himself a series of questioning looks from everyone but El, who meets his gaze and gives him a knowing smirk.

"I think I'm just going to get a burger," Max shrugs, passing the menu to El. "And more fries. What'd about you, El?"

"Waffles," El says simply, not bothering to look at the menu.

"Waffles?! For dinner?" Dustin exclaims.

El gives him a stern look. "Yes."

"Waffles sound great!" Mike pipes up eagerly. "I think I'll get some too."

"You already ordered a burger, though," Will reminds him, pointing to Mike's half-finished food.

"I'm not really in the mood for that, anymore," Mike hastily explains.

"So, you're just going to throw away a perfectly good burger?!" Dustin exclaims, horrified.

"That's kind of a waste of money," Lucas nods.

"Plus, you're gonna get fat," Max adds.

Mike scowls at all of them. "There's nothing wrong with wanting waffles, I have money, and I'm not fat!"

"Mike," El says, locking eyes with him, "It's ok. You can have some of my waffles."

Mike instantly feels his cheeks flush red. "Okay," he mumbles, simmering down.

"Wow. You guys are adorable," Max says dryly, "You know, Wheeler, El like, never shares her waffles with anyone, so this is a pretty big deal."

"That's not true!" El gasps, cheeks now as red as Mike's.

Max only shrugs and smiles mischievously. "If you say so," she says in a sing-songy voice that only makes El blush harder.

Benny approaches their table to take the girls' orders and 15 minutes later, Max is giving some of her fries to Lucas, and El is carefully cutting her waffles into halves.

"Can I have a fry?" Dustin asks hopefully.

"Maybe you should order your own food," Max mimics, but nevertheless, she tosses a couple fries to both him and Will.

"Here," El says shyly, placing her waffle halves onto Mike's plate.

"I don't need all of this," Mike says reluctantly.

El shrugs and gets to work on the waffles she has left, seemingly indifferent to his protests.

As they both start to eat their waffles, their elbows brush, their legs

are still close together, he can smell her lavender shampoo, and it finally feels like things are okay between them again. More than okay, actually.

"So, uh, Max," Lucas says, taking a deep breath, "Guess what?"

"What?" Max asks, eyeing him.

Lucas smiles shyly, "I beat your high score in Dig-Dug. I got 752,001."

"Are you shitting me?" Max exclaims, jaw dropping.

"It's true!" Mike adds, "I was there."

"When!?"

"The same day we saw you playing at the arcade," Mike explains, "After you left."

"You play at the arcade?" El asks, eyes wide.

"She plays at the arcade?!" Dustin and Will echo together.

Max freezes, face growing pale. Mike can tell she's trying to think of an excuse, and for a moment he feels bad for outing her, but at the same time, it was technically Lucas' fault, and it was probably going to come out eventually.

"Why didn't you tell me?" El asks concernedly.

Max hesitates. "Because...," she finally mutters, "It's lame."

"It's not lame!" El insists.

"Video games are awesome," Dustin gushes.

"And you shouldn't be ashamed of liking different things," Will adds.

Max slumps back in her seat, cheeks crimson. "Whatever," she mutters, looking slightly shy. She gives Lucas a nudge to his arm before adding, "You know this means that we'll have to go back to the arcade so I can kick your ass, right?"

"I know," Lucas smiles, absolutely thrilled.

"We should all go together," Will smiles, "It'd be fun."

"Yeah, I gotta see this for myself," Dustin nods.

Mike glances at El just as she's glancing back at him. "Yeah," he says casually, "That could be fun."

"Really fun," El nods, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Tomorrow, then," Max says definitively. "You're going down, Sinclair."

To quote Max, it's not like this means they're like, friends or anything. The rest of the night is spent placing bets on whether or not Max or Lucas will win the Dig-Dug tournament, breaking up arguments between Dustin and Max, and making jokes about how totally screwed over Jennifer Hayes is.

They're definitely not friends, but —

They're getting there.

## 9. The Losers' Club

It's Thursday evening, they're at the arcade, and it's all Max's fault, really. Not that El's complaining, or anything, but it's definitely all thanks to her best friend that she's currently snuggled up next to Mike.

When El had tearfully phoned her Tuesday night, recounting how horribly her library trip with Mike had gone, it was Max who'd not only comforted her, but given her sound advice as well.

"You can't keep acting like a total spaz whenever he brings up the party," Max explained, "Then he's going to keep getting suspicious."

"Then what should I do?" El asked worriedly, "He's getting closer to finding out!"

"Just act normal!"

"I'm not normal."

"You know what I mean," Max huffed, "Just...bat your eyes at him, or something. That'll distract him."

"Max!"

"What?! It's true!"

Despite Max's advice, El, in fact, did not spend Wednesday batting her eyes at Mike. Quite the opposite, actually. There were several moments during Biology when she knew he was totally looking right at her, but she kept her gaze adamantly fixated on her notebook. After their small argument (if that's what it even was), she just didn't know how to initiate another conversation with him. It kept freaking her out because she wanted to talk to him, but she feared that things would always just be awkward between them now.

Thankfully, Max had helped distract her from her worries with skateboard lessons.

"You can't keep having your Dad drive you around everywhere," Max

explained after school.

"Why?" El frowned, puzzled.

"It's weird."

"Oh."

"Plus, we'll be able to go where we want, whenever we want," Max continued excitedly, "It'll be totally awesome."

And so, they spent the rest of the evening practicing ollies in Max's driveway, which consequently led to El falling flat on her face and scraping her chin. It was so worth it though. She got fairly good at it, and for a few hours, El didn't have to worry about Mike.

Until they arrived at Benny's.

They were walking towards the front door when El saw the bikes. *Mike's bike.*

She felt her heartbeat stop as she stopped dead in her tracks.

*No, no, no, not here...*

"You okay, El?" Max asked, turning to look back at her.

"That's Mike's bike," El explained nervously, pointing towards it. "I think he's here."

"What?" Max frowned, glancing around the parking lot. A second later, her gaze landed on the window and she gave El a sharp nudge. "Found him."

Sure enough, El looked up to see Mike and his friends staring at them through the front window. When they saw that Max and El had spotted them, they quickly ducked down out of eyeshot.

"Oh my god," Max snorted, "They're totally stalking us."

El looked down at her feet, downcast. "Or hiding from us."

"Why would they hide from us?"

"Because Mike and I argued," El reminded her somberly.

"Don't be so dramatic, El," Max scoffed, "I'm pretty sure you could punch Mike in the face and he'd still drool over you like a total dweeb."

El flushed pink. "I would never punch him in the face."

"I know you wouldn't, because you love him."

El flushed pinker. "I don't *love* him," she half-heartedly insisted.

"You totally do, which is why we're going to go in there and sit with them."

"What?!"

"C'mon!" Max said, already walking towards the restaurant. She stopped to set her board beside the boys' bikes and motioned for El to do the same.

"What if he doesn't want to talk to me?" El asked worriedly, setting down the board she'd borrowed from Max.

"He will."

"What should I say?"

Max pitched her voice higher and gave El a starry-eyed look. "What was that?" Max said breathily, twirling a strand of hair around her finger, "Oh yes, Mike, I *will* marry you! I love you AND your sweet comic books so, so much!"

El gave her a flat stare, unimpressed.

Max only laughed, utterly amused with herself.

Then they'd entered Benny's, joined the guys in their booth, started talking, and just like that, made plans to hang out at the arcade the next day.

If it hadn't been for Max convincing El to go in, El probably wouldn't

be where she currently is — seated beside Mike inside the Palace Arcade.

Her brow is furrowed in concentration as her hands work quickly. Mike is glancing back and forth between her and his watch, keeping track of the seconds.

"233, 234, 235," he counts breathlessly, shaking from excitement, "236, 237!"

At 240 seconds, El successfully solves the Rubik's cube and holds it out to him, beaming triumphantly. "Finished!" She announces.

Max and Lucas are still in the midst of their *Dig-Dug* tournament, cheered on by Will and Dustin. They've been going back and forth for hours, each refusing to let the other win. Every time Max got the top score, Lucas was ready to strike back with another quarter, and vice-versa.

It was seemingly never going to end. After cheering them on for an hour, El and Mike, needing a break, had retreated to the concessions area to get some snacks. Mike chivalrously purchased some popcorn for the pair of them to share, they found a bench to sit on, and then they started chatting about their favorite games.

"I don't have a favorite game," El admitted.

"How?!"

El shrugged.

Mike thought for a moment. "Well, you were good at the Rubik's cube," he offered, "That's kind of like a game."

"I wasn't *that* good," El said humbly.

To her surprise, Mike responded by slipping off his backpack, digging inside it, and pulling out his still-completed Rubik's cube. "You did this, in like, 30 minutes," He reminded her. "I've still never been able to solve it at all!"

El felt her heart warm. He'd kept it just the way she left it. He'd held

onto it, and thought of her, and was impressed by her, and it suddenly took everything within El to not tackle him to the ground and hug his adorably, stupidly, thoughtful self.

"I bet I could do it faster," El suddenly speaks up, eyes shining.

Mike had been so excited by the idea, El actually heard him gasp under his breath. "Could you?"

She could.

The first time, it took her 21 minutes. The second time: 15 minutes. Then 7. Then 5. And finally—

"4 minutes!?" Mike now exclaims, gawking at his watch. He looks up at her, eyes shining, obviously impressed. "Holy shit! You're amazing!"

"Thank you," El smiles modestly.

"I've never seen anyone solve one that fast!" Mike continues, smiling reverently. "How do you do it?"

El shrugs, already starting to scramble the cube again. "It's hard to explain," she says.

"Can you teach me?" Mike asks hopefully.

"Okay," El smiles shyly. She motions for him to come closer, and he eagerly complies. "First, you make a white cross," she explains, moving the cube accordingly as she talks, "But you have to make sure that the sides still match."

Mike keeps his gaze locked on her hands as she speaks, hanging onto her every word. "Okay!"

El continues walking him through each step until the cube is solved. By the way Mike is gazing at her, one would have thought that she had just revealed the greatest secrets of the universe to him.

"Do you wanna try?" El asks.

Mike nods eagerly.

El reshuffles the cube and hands it to him when they're suddenly interrupted.

"Mike!" Lucas pants, running over to them, "I need money!"

"You're out!?" Mike exclaims in disbelief, "How!? You had like, 30 quarters!"

"I used them all!" Lucas whines. "Max is killing me!"

Mike hands the Rubik's cube to El and checks his pockets. "I'm all out!" He says, giving Lucas a shrug.

"Wait!" El pipes up. She passes the cube back to Mike and unzips the pocket of her leather jacket. Inside, a couple sticks of gum, a tube of chapstick, and...

"Here!" She says, passing two quarters to Lucas.

"Thanks!" Lucas beams, accepting the quarters gratefully. He dashes back over to the game console, looking both determined and excited.

"That was nice of you," Mike smiles, looking back at El.

El shrugs.

Mike hesitates before looking her over and speaking again. "Hey, El?"

El eyes him. "Yeah?"

"I just wanted to say sorry," Mike says fervently, "For bringing up the party and bringing you to the library. I...I was just being an idiot, and I should have been more sensitive. I don't know what I was thinking."

El softens. "Mike, it's okay," she assures him.

"I'm just going to forget about the whole thing," Mike continues, "With the lamp and stuff. I mean, it's in the past, right?"

"Right," El echoes, frowning slightly. She feels a sharp jab of conflict

resonate within her; she's not quite sure how to feel. On the one hand, she's happy that Mike has decided to drop it. On the other, she feels like she's still lying to him. It's just more half-truths and secrets and she's so sick of it.

She wants to tell him, but she knows she can't. It's too risky, too dangerous. Even though the laboratory shut down 5 years ago, there's no telling what would happen if the world found out that a telekinetic was roaming about freely.

"Alright, I'm going to try and solve this," Mike says, interrupting her thoughts.

El's face pales. "What?"

"The Rubik's cube?" Mike replies, raising an eyebrow as he holds the cube up.

"Oh! Right," El blushes.

"Can you time me?"

"Sure."

Mike slips off his watch and carefully gives it to her. Their fingers brush as he places it in her hands and El unexpectedly flashes back to their frog dissection lab, when Mike had passed her a pair of safety goggles. Their fingers had brushed just as they had now, El had blushed just as she was now, and, as Mike's brow furrows and he determinedly begins working the cube, El can't help but notice that he still looks just as *cute, cute, cute, cute*.

---

Their friendship grows rapidly, yet organically, and Mike is loving every minute of it.

During Friday's lunch, when Mike and the guys are seated at their usual cafeteria table, El and Max pull up two chairs and join them just as easily as they had at Benny's. They sit in the same order that they did at the diner — Max, Lucas, and Dustin on one side, El, Mike, and Will on the other.

"I hate the spaghetti here," Max says, crinkling up her nose at her lunch tray, "It tastes like brains."

The boys are taken aback for a moment, but then Will points out that the oddly pink spaghetti sauce makes it even *look* like brains, Dustin questions why either of them has had any experience eating brains, and that leads into a heated theoretical discussion on how they would individually survive a night of the living dead.

"Find a place to hide," Will states.

"Fireball them!" Dustin eagerly asserts.

"Yeah!" Lucas nods, agreeing with Dustin.

"A knife," El winces, "Like in *Halloween*."

"I'd find a way to sneak to safety," Mike offers.

Max is unimpressed. "Have any of you geeks actually seen *Night of the Living Dead*?" She scoffs, "You'd all die! Everyone knows that the only way to survive is a gunshot to the head!"

"Disgusting," El frowns, scrunching up her nose.

"Awesome," Lucas gushes.

It's weird to be hanging out in public like this. El and Max, with their dark eyeshadow and leather jackets, contrast so strongly with the boys' collared shirts and sunny demeanors. They can feel the judgmental eyes of some of the other kids on them, particularly from Troy and his friends, but in the moment, it doesn't matter — they're having fun.

After lunch, they walk to their lockers together, then to their classes too. Max and Lucas break out into another debate over who's the real *Dig-Dug* champion (even though Max had totally annihilated him the night before).

"We should go back again," Lucas says as the group moves through the hallways together, "Like, this weekend."

"Can't," Max replies, shaking her head, "There's this new band I wanna listen to, Love and Rockets, and their album comes out today. El and I are going to the record store this weekend."

"To just listen to one album?" Dustin frowns, confused. "All weekend?"

"Not all weekend," Max eyes him, "And not one album. We listen to other stuff too."

"Like what?" Mike asks, glancing at both girls.

"The Ramones," Max lists off, "Sex Pistols, The Runaways..."

"The Clash!" El eagerly adds.

"You like The Clash?!" Will exclaims excitedly, turning to look up at El.

"Yes!" El gasps, turning to look back at him. "Do you?"

"Yes!"

"They're my favorite!"

"Mine too!" Will enthuses, "Did you know that they're releasing a new album—"

"—November 4?" El finishes.

Will and El both beam at each other, absolutely ecstatic. If it was anyone other than Will, Mike might have been a little jealous, but instead, he's thrilled to see two of his closest friends getting along so well.

"We should go to the record store," Mike suggests, glancing at everyone else, "Together."

"Can we?" El and Will ask happily.

Max eyes them. "I guess," she gives in, "Only because you dweebs need to hear what real music is."

"We listen to music!" Dustin insists.

"If it's from a movie, it doesn't count," Max dismisses.

Mike eyes her. "I don't think that's true."

El meets his eye. "It's not."

The two exchange brief, knowing smiles, just as they had at Benny's, and Mike feels his heart beat a little faster.

"It's true," Max insists. "And I'll prove it to you. Saturday morning, records shop, you nerds better show up."

"We will!" Lucas nods.

And they do.

Mike accidentally wakes up later than he was supposed to Saturday morning. He gets ready in a hurried frenzy, more than alarming his mother, who's cooking breakfast in the kitchen.

"Michael?" She frowns, eyeing him as he flings open the door to the coat closet. "What's going on?"

"I got plans!" Mike explains, quickly throwing on his coat.

"With who?"

"My friends!"

"This early? You haven't even had breakfast!"

Mike hurries into the kitchen, opens the pantry cupboard, and retrieves a strawberry Pop-Tart.

"There!" He says, taking a bite as he hurries back out the door. "Breakfast!"

Mrs. Wheeler gives him an exasperated look but lets him go. "Goodbye!" She calls out as he hurries out the front door.

"Bye!" Mike calls back, mouth full of toaster pastry.

As he heads out into the chilly fall morning, he faithfully mutters song lyrics under his breath, brow furrowed determinedly.

After school let out on Friday, Will had loaned Mike a mixtape of The Clash's most popular songs. "Jonathan gave it to me," Will explained, pulling it out of his locker, "You should listen to it."

"Why?" Mike asked.

"To impress El!"

"W-what?" Mike stammered, cheeks flushing red. "I don't want to impress her!"

Will gave him a disbelieving look. "Really?"

Mike hesitated. "Okay, so, maybe I want to, like, a little."

"A little?"

Mike smiled sheepishly. "A lot?"

"So, listen to it!" Will smiled back, "Then when we go to the records store tomorrow, you can talk about it with her."

It was an ingenious plan, one that Mike would forever be grateful for. He spent all of Friday night listening to the tape, trying his best to memorize as many of the songs as he could.

The results of this endeavor are mixed.

"If I say that it's the end of time," Mike recites, mounting his bike, "I'll be here 'til you're mine."

He pauses, frowning. That doesn't sound right.

The whole thing is just so annoyingly frustrating. Mike can easily memorize the entire anatomy of a frog for Biology class, but when it comes to memorizing a couple songs for his crush, his mind feels like a huge, empty void.

Unfortunately, he doesn't have time to go back inside and listen to

the mixtape again, not unless he wants to be even more late.

He takes a deep breath and does his best to ignore his nerves as he begins biking towards downtown Hawkins.

When Mike arrives at the records shop, it's 10:15 and everybody else is already there. There's a pile of bikes leaning up against the side of the brick shop, along with one skateboard. A second skateboard is currently in use by Dustin, who is cautiously standing atop it.

"I think I got it!" Dustin says triumphantly, gaze locked on his feet. He's on the sidewalk in front of the store, looked upon by Lucas, Dustin, Will, Max, and El.

"Great, now do something!" Lucas says wryly, looking unimpressed.

El spots Mike approaching first. "Mike!" She calls out, and *holy shit* his name really does sound infinitely cooler when she says it.

El's sudden exclamation causes Dustin to glance up in surprise. Unfortunately, the swift jerk of his head throws off his balance, causing his feet to slide out in front of him while the skateboard moves in the opposite direction. He slips and falls off the board, landing back-first onto the sidewalk.

There's a collective gasp and wince from everyone witnessing this.

"*Shit!*" Dustin hisses as he scrambles to his feet, "Son of a bitch, Michael!"

"What did I do?" Mike asks indignantly, parking his bike alongside the others.

"You ruined my concentration!"

"Concentration?" Max snorts, "You weren't even moving!"

"I was going to!"

"Like, next year!"

"No!"

As Mike walks closer to his friends, he can't help but glance at El. She's smiling at him, looking happy that he's finally arrived. Mike does his best to smile back, but he just feels so nervous about impressing her that he's pretty sure that his smile comes off as more of an awkward grimace.

Yikes.

"Let's go inside, already," Max instructs, opening the door to the shop, "Wheeler took like, 5 billion years to get here."

"Sorry," Mike blushes, following everyone else inside.

The records shop is small but packed to the brim with all kinds of music. Winding, haphazard aisles are formed out of long tables covered in records and cassette tapes. In the corner, there's a records player on display in case anyone wants to listen to one of the discs. In the opposite corner, a bored-looking teenager, a senior kid from their school, is sitting behind the cash register and listening to their Walkman.

Mike's only been here a couple times with Will, but only recently. In the past, Will always did music stuff with Jonathan, but now that his brother is away at NYU, Will's been asking Mike to accompany him more often.

Lucas and Dustin, on the other hand, have never been here, and consequently look pretty excited.

"There's so many records!" Lucas beams, looking at Max in surprise.

"Yeah, that's why it's called a *records* shop, nerd," Max smirks, punching Lucas' arm.

"Where are we supposed to even start?" Dustin questions.

"With the good stuff," Max says with an eye roll. She motions for both guys to follow her, grabs Lucas by the arm, and leads them both off to the punk-rock section of the shop.

Mike, Will, and El start looking around together too. They wander the aisles and idly look at any records that seem interesting.

As El starts digging through some old records for The Beatles, Will quietly pulls Mike aside.

"Mike!" Will whispers, "Did you listen to the tape? The one with The Clash?"

"Yeah!" Mike nods, whispering back, "But I'm starting to forget some of their songs!"

"Which songs?"

Mike hesitates. "...Most of them."

Will's eyes widen. "How!?"

"I'm nervous!" Mike admits. "I don't wanna look like an idiot!"

"You won't, I'll help you," Will assures him, "I mean, I'll try."

The two exchange a nod before rejoining El's side.

El looks up as they come closer and smiles at Will. "I can't believe you like The Clash," she says admiringly.

"They're the best," Will nods, "I've been listening to them since my brother introduced me."

"My Dad introduced me," El replies, "When I was little."

"Yeah, The Clash is pretty great," Mike cuts in, "I love them, they're like, my favorite."

Will casually works his way past them, pretending to be interested in the stack of records behind El.

El looks over at Mike, slightly puzzled. "You like them too?"

"Uh, yeah!" Mike nods.

"Why didn't you say so yesterday?"

"Oh. I, uh...forgot."

"Oh. What's your favorite album?" El asks.

"Uhh, Mike hesitates. "I dunno, they're all really good."

El eyes him suspiciously. "You don't have a favorite?"

"No, no, I do!" Mike quickly amends. His gaze flits to Will, who's still standing behind El. "My favorite is..."

*Come back, rot*, Will helpfully mouths.

"Come back, rot," Mike says breezily.

El frowns, nonplussed. "What?!"

*No!* Will mouths, *Come Bat Rah!*

"I meant, uh, Come Bat Rah," Mike quickly amends.

"Do you mean Combat Rock?" El offers, looking a little confused.

Will nods, looking exasperated.

"Yeah!" Mike nods, hoping he doesn't look as embarrassed as he feels. He probably does. "I was just, uh, kidding around."

"Oh," El smiles, still looking a little puzzled.

"Yeah," Mike replies lamely.

"Combat Rock is good," El continues, "But their first album is better."

"What?!" Will suddenly snaps.

El, alarmed, turns back to glance at him.

"Combat Rock is so much better!" Will explains, "'Should I Stay or Should I Go?' 'Rock the Casbah'?"

"Those are good, but 'Police and Thieves' is my favorite," El contends.

"Why?"

El shrugs. She turns to glance back at Mike, looking at him expectantly. "What do you think?"

Mike starts to sweat a little nervously. "Um," he stammers, looking off to the side, "I...uh..."

As El continues to eye him, Mike starts to realize that he's kinda acting like a huge liar here. He obviously knows nothing about punk rock music, and acting like he does is only embarrassing him. Plus, he definitely doesn't want El to think that he's a liar.

The whole thing is a disaster.

"Okay, so," he confesses, "I...uh...I lied."

El frowns. "What?"

"I don't know anything about The Clash," Mike says quickly. Maybe if he speaks faster, she won't hear as much, and not be as mad. "Will loaned me a tape yesterday so I could listen to them and talk about them with you, but then I forgot everything like an idiot and I'm really, really sorry."

El blinks at him for a moment, trying to take it all in.

Will is looking back and forth between them anxiously. "I'm sorry," he says to El, "It was my idea to give him the tape."

"Mike," El says slowly, and Mike winces, waiting for the inevitable 'wow-I-can't-believe-how-much-of-a-loser-you-are.'

Thankfully, it doesn't come.

"You don't have to pretend to like The Clash for me," El instead smiles, looking bemused.

"But I wanna like the stuff that you like," Mike explains, "Like, I just want us to be friends, and friends share interests."

"Then you could have just asked me," El points out.

Will and Mike exchange embarrassed smiles.

"Good point," Will mumbles.

"And besides," El continues, looking at both of them, "We are friends. All of us."

Mike smiles hopefully. "Really?"

Before El can reply, she's cut off by the sound of running footsteps. The three look up to see Max, Dustin, and Lucas running up to them, laughing giddily amongst themselves.

"Hey, guys!" Dustin says, coming to a stop, "Look what we found!"

"We're looking for the funniest album covers!" Max adds, "Like, the lamest ones."

"Which one do you think is worse?" Lucas adds, holding up two records. On the album in his left hand, a nearly naked man with guitars for arms is screaming at the viewer. On the album in his right hand, a man stands with his butt to the camera, onlooked by a dog and woman kneeling before him.

"Oh, god," Will winces, "Guitar-hands, for sure."

"Told you!" Max laughs, punching Dustin in the arm.

"No way!" Dustin gripes, scowling at Max, "Mine is so much dumber!"

"They're both pretty dumb," Mike snorts, unable to stop himself from laughing.

"Mine is dumber!" Dustin insists.

"*You're* dumber!" Max taunts.

Dustin flips her off, so Max responds by grabbing his hat and chucking it across the store.

"What the hell?!" Dustin yelps.

"You guys are crazy!" Lucas laments.

"First one to get it gets to keep it!" Max announces, rushing after it.

"NO!" Dustin snaps, chasing after her.

"I'm getting it just so you two will shut up!" Lucas exclaims, shoving past them.

As Max, Lucas, and Dustin begin chasing each other through the shop, El turns to give Mike and Will a coy smile.

"Yeah, we're definitely friends."

---

El and Max hardly ever bicker. Ever since they became friends in the 6th grade, the only fights they've ever gotten in is what movie to watch or which member of AC/DC is the best.

Ever since Dustin and Max became friends less than a week ago, the only fights they've gotten in is all of them.

They're eating lunch on Tuesday when Dustin and Max break out into yet another argument.

"How have you never seen Star Wars!?" Dustin exclaims.

"Because I watch good movies!" Max snaps.

"Take that back!"

"No!"

"How do you know it's not good if you haven't seen it?" Will points out, eyeing Max.

"Because!" Max replies unhelpfully.

"That's not an answer," El states. She's seated beside Mike, as usual, and consequently catches the grateful smile he gives her.

"You should really give it a try," Mike says, turning back to Max, "You might like it. It's really good."

Max makes a face. "But it's just so...geeky."

"So is playing arcade games!" Lucas points out, "And you like that!"

"Because you get to blow stuff up," Max shrugs.

"Stuff blows up in Star Wars," Dustin defends.

"Yeah, my brain, from boredom."

El knows that Max isn't really against the idea of watching Star Wars. Max is the kind of person who often expresses how much she likes something by acting like she doesn't like it, like when she gripes about listening to Cyndi Lauper or complains to El about how "lame" Lucas looks in his striped sweaters.

Regardless, the guys don't know Max as well as El does, so they naturally think that she's being serious.

El glances over to see Mike frowning. His gaze drops to his lunch tray as he starts pushing around his lunch — a serving of 'mystery meatloaf' — with his fork.

He's obviously feeling upset, which El refuses to let happen. Plus, thinking back to her conversation with Mike at the record store, friends are supposed to share interests, and if there's one thing that the boys are interested in, it's definitely Star Wars.

"Let's watch it," El declares, "Together."

"What?" Max snaps.

"Really?" Mike asks.

"Yes," El nods. "Tonight!"

"Why tonight?" Lucas asks.

"Because Max and Dustin won't stop arguing otherwise," Will answers point-blank.

"We could watch it at my house!" Mike offers, perking up, "After A.V. club, obviously."

El feels her cheeks flush pink. At Mike's house? SHE would be going to MIKE'S house. MIKE'S. As she processes this, she feels like her

brain and heart are exploding at the same time.

Thankfully, she manages to keep a calm exterior.

"Yes," she says simply, cutting into her own mystery meatloaf, "That sounds good."

"Then let's do it!" Lucas asks, before hesitantly glancing at Max, "I mean, if we all want to."

Max sighs and rolls her eyes up to the ceiling. "Fine. Whatever. I just hope your dweebness isn't contagious, Wheeler."

"Har, har," Mike replies dryly.

When lunch ends, they all make plans to meet at Mike's house at 5:30 that night. While the boys head off to A.V. Club, El and Max decide to head back to El's house to wait.

When they arrive, Hopper is seated at the kitchen table, surrounded by manilla folders. El can smell his cigarettes as soon as she and Max enter the foyer, and even though the smell always makes her crinkle her nose, it's oddly comforting at the same time.

"Hey, kid," Hopper calls out as El closes the front door, "Is that you?"

"Yeah," El replies, leading Max into the kitchen. "What are you doing home?"

"Slow day at work," Hopper replies, keeping a cigarette balanced between his lips as he talks, not taking his eyes off the folder he's currently looking at, "I'm just trying to re-work some old case files."

"Sweet," Max smiles, leaning against the doorframe. "Any murders?"

"Nope."

"Boring."

Hopper eyes her with a wry smile before turning to El. "So, what are you girls up to tonight?"

El blushes. "We...uh...we're going out. Later."

"Really?" Hopper asks, "Where?"

El hesitates. "To...um...."

"We're going to Mike's house!" Max interrupts, examining her nails.  
"To watch Star Wars."

"MAX!" El yelps.

"Cops!" Max replies, pointing to Hopper, "They always find out everything!"

"Because you're telling them!"

"Mike?" Hopper smiles, raising an eyebrow, "That punk you like?"

"He's not a punk!" El insists, flushing red.

"He's inviting us over to watch Star Wars," Max adds, "*Star Wars*. That's like, the exact opposite of a punk."

"Humph," Hopper snorts. He turns his attention back to his case files, and for a moment, El thinks he's actually going to drop the subject.

He doesn't.

"So, when am I going to meet this 'Mike'?" Hopper asks conversationally.

"Never!" El retorts, only half-joking.

"And why not?"

"You'll scare him."

"I'm not that scary," Hopper objects. He turns to look up at Max and gives her a questioning look. "Am I?"

"You're pretty scary," Max shrugs, "You've got a literal gun."

"It's not like I'd have to use it on him," Hopper points out, "Unless he

deserves it."

"DAD!" El exclaims, "This is why you won't meet him!"

"I will," Hopper assures her, giving her a knowing smile. He takes the cigarette out of his mouth and uses it to motion towards Max, "I'm a cop."

Max snorts and giggles.

El gives them both flat stares.

"You love us," Max insists, grinning at El.

El raises an eyebrow.

"You do," Max shrugs, grabbing El's hand, "Now, let's go watch, like MTV or something, I wanna see what new albums are coming out next."

The girls head into the living room and proceed to do so until 5 o'clock. The entire time they're watching TV, El can hardly focus. She's just so excited and nervous at the idea of actually getting to go to Mike's house, she can't think straight.

The whole skateboard ride to the Wheeler's goes by in a blur. Thankfully, Max leads the way, expertly navigating them to the address Mike had hastily written on a sheet of notebook paper for them.

When they pull up to the Wheeler's driveway, El feels like she's going to faint. Her brain starts going all haywire, falling apart into nothing more than *Mike, Mike, Mike! Mike's house! A house! HIS house! MIKE!*

"Let's do this," Max says confidently, hopping off her board and striding up to the front stoop.

El takes a shaky breath and nods, following Max's lead.

The girls carefully set their boards on the front lawn and climb the front steps. They stop in front of the door, illuminated by the porch light.

"Well, knock," Max says, turning to El.

"I don't want to!" El says anxiously.

"Why not?"

El just looks at her helplessly, her nervousness etched all over her face.

Max rolls her eyes. "I don't know why you're still, like, scared of him. You know he's crazy about you, right?"

El blushes. "Really?"

"Oh my god," Max says flatly. "Yes. It's so obvious."

El smiles at this, while Max, seemingly impatient, steps forward to knock on the front door.

El feels her heart skip a beat as they wait.

*All right, it's time. This is really happening.*

A moment later, the front door opens and a woman, presumably Mike's mother, peeks out. When she sees that it's two girls, both wearing grungy t-shirts, washed-out jeans, and leather jackets, she looks confused, to say the least.

"Can I help you?" Mrs. Wheeler asks, looking puzzled.

Max nudges El, so El takes the lead by speaking up hesitantly. "Hi," She says, smiling shyly. "I'm, uh, El, and this is Max. We're here to see Mike?"

Mrs. Wheeler pauses. "To see him?"

"He invited us over," Max explains, raising an eyebrow. "He didn't tell you?"

For a moment, El worries that they're going to get in trouble. She knows that Hopper would definitely be upset if she invited two strangers over without asking. Mrs. Wheeler, on the other hand, looks

ecstatic. "You're here to see Mike?" She asks, beaming, "I didn't know he had any friends that were..."

"Girls?" Max says dryly.

Mrs. Wheeler nods, looking absolutely beside herself with happiness. But before she can say anything more, there's suddenly the sound of rushing feet, and then Mike appears at his mother's side.

"Mom!" Mike whines, looking embarrassed, "Why didn't you tell me they were here?!"

"Michael!" His mother says excitedly, turning to smile at him, "Why didn't you tell me that you were inviting girls over?"

"Because!" Mike blushes, avoiding eye contact with El and Max.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Mrs. Wheeler whispers, though her voice is still clearly audible.

"MOM!" Mike hisses. "No! We're just friends! We're just gonna watch a movie downstairs, okay?"

"Alright, alright!" Mrs. Wheeler relents, turning back to smile at the girls. "Well, come on in! Is there anything I can get you?"

"They're fine!" Mike insists, cheeks still bright red. He turns to Max and El, giving them both an earnest look. "C'mon, the guys and I already have everything set up downstairs."

"Lead the way," Max shrugs.

"Make sure to keep the noise down," Mrs. Wheeler gently reminds them as they start to walk off, "Holly is going to start getting ready for bed soon!"

"We will!" Mike calls back.

"Who's Holly?" El asks as Mike continues to lead her and Max down the hallway.

"Holly's my little sister," Mike explains, "She's six. I have another

sister, Nancy, but she's in college now. They're both pretty cool, I guess." He turns to look at El curiously. "Do you have any siblings?"

El exchanges a quick, nervous glance with Max. *She barely had parents.*

"No, just me," she answers briskly, not looking directly at Mike.

"Be grateful," Max pipes up, taking the focus off of El, "I'm still trying to figure out how to ship Billy off somewhere."

"Is Billy your brother?" Mike asks.

"Step-brother," Max corrects with an eye roll.

"Oh," Mike frowns, "That sucks."

"Yeah."

Mike leads them to the basement door and opens it. As they begin to descend the stairs, El can already hear the rest of the guys joking around excitedly.

Mike's basement is cozy, despite how cluttered it is. There seems to be an object stuffed into every square inch of space — boxes, trunks, posters, books, furniture, lamps, rugs. The wood paneling on the walls makes the environment seem both warmer and safer somehow. When they finally reach the bottom of the stairs, El can feel her feet sink into the plush carpeting, and it's heavenly.

The boys have cleared a space in the center of the basement. They have a small TV set up, a couch, and two recliners. Will and Dustin have claimed the recliners, while Lucas is seated on the floor in front of the TV, munching away on a bowl of popcorn. When he sees that Max and El have arrived, he looks up eagerly.

"Hi, Max!" He smiles, beaming up at her.

Mike gives him an affronted look and motions to El.

"And El!" Lucas adds quickly, blushing red.

El and Mike exchange wry smiles. "Hi," she replies, giving everyone a smile.

"Alright," Max sighs. She walks forward and sits on the floor beside Lucas, stealing some of his popcorn, "Let's get this geek-fest over with."

Mike turns to smile nervously at El. "We can sit on the couch, if you want?" Even though the sentence is technically a statement, the way his voice rises at the end makes it sound more like a question.

El feels that same brain/heart-explosion feeling again, but she only nods and follows Mike to the couch.

As Mike and El get settled, Dustin gets out of his recliner, a Star Wars VHS in his hand. He moves to stand in front of the TV, locking gazes with Max and El. "Alright," He says dramatically, waving his hands as he speaks, "Prepare to experience the most life-changing 2 hours and 5 minutes of your life!"

"Wow," Max says dryly, "And just when I thought you guys couldn't get any nerdier."

Dustin makes a face at her before turning to insert the VHS tape into the player.

Mike turns to smile at El nervously. "Are you excited?"

"Yes," El nods, smiling back.

"Because, it's okay if you're not," Mike continues, "I mean, you don't have to pretend to like it, if you don't. I'll understand. Kind of. I mean, you won't hurt my feelings or anything like that."

"*Mike*," El cuts him off and looks him directly in the eye. When their gazes meet and Mike gives her a soft, hopeful look, it takes everything within El to not melt on the spot.

"Relax," she instructs him. Just as she had in the library, she then reaches out and gently places her hand over his.

"Sorry," Mike mumbles, looking flustered. "I know I talk too much

sometimes."

*It's cute*, El muses, but when Mike's eyes suddenly widen and his cheeks start to flare red, she realizes that she accidentally voiced her sentiments aloud.

*Shit.*

Thankfully, the conversation is quickly cut off by the loud blare of brass instruments. Their attention is quickly jolted towards the TV screen, where the opening crawl for Star Wars is beginning to play.

El moves her hand away from Mike's and focuses on watching the movie.

It's a little confusing at first, with all the technical sci-fi stuff, but Mike is right there to whisper in her ear and explain what's going on during the more confusing parts.

Lucas spends most of the movie glancing at Max, checking to see how she's reacting.

Usually, that reaction is a snarky comment. As the movie begins, Max takes it upon herself to point out everything from how annoying C3-PO is to how weird everyone's clothes are.

Dustin is evidently trying to not lose his mind. "He's supposed to be annoying!" He snaps, "And they're in *outer space*, why would they dress how we do on Earth?!"

"Whatever. This is so dumb," Max says, grabbing a handful of popcorn.

"It's not dumb!" Dustin insists. "What's dumb about an epic space opera that uses science-fiction allegories to tell a story of human suffering and loss, complex family dynamics, and personal strength?"

Max blinks at him. "Literally everything."

They're at the part in which Luke is practicing the force by deflecting laser beams with a helmet over his head. As Luke expertly maneuvers his lightsaber to deflect each attack, Mike sighs wistfully.

"What?" El whispers.

"It would just be so cool to have the Force," Mike whispers back, turning to look at her. "Like, can you imagine being able to like, move and see things with your mind and control stuff? It'd be the best superpower ever!"

El hesitates. The prickly feeling of nervousness makes her skin feel hot and her mouth dry. "That would be cool," she says simply.

"Just imagine all the stuff you'd be able to do!" Mike continues, "Like —"

"Shut up, Wheeler!" Max snaps suddenly, "I can't hear what anyone's saying!"

"I thought you said it was dumb!" Lucas points out.

"It is," Max insists, unable to take her eyes away from the screen.

Mike stops talking, and the rest of the movie goes by more smoothly. As the story reaches its climax, Max stops with her snarky comments, and El finds that she's able to understand everything that's going on without Mike's help.

When the movie ends, Max looks around at the other guys anxiously. "That's it?!" She snaps bitterly.

Lucas eyes her hesitantly. "What do you mean 'that's it'?"

"Darth Vader is still out there!" Max explains, sounding distressed, "And that other old dude just dropped dead! Then the movie just ends!"

"There's still two more movies," Dustin says dryly, "But I guess since you thought the movie was so dumb, we don't have to watch them."

Max pauses, mouth snapping shut. "Fine. Whatever," she shrugs, folding her arms, "I don't want to watch them anyway."

"She does," El pipes up from the couch, "Believe me."

Max turns to give El a dirty look, but El only beans back, elated to have turned the tables on her friend for once.

"It's only 8:00," Will says, checking his watch, "I think we should have enough time to watch the first sequel, at least."

"That's the best one," Mike nods eagerly.

"Do you want to, Max?" Lucas asks carefully.

Max rolls her eyes. "I guess."

And so they do.

El finds that she doesn't need Mike to explain things to her this time around, but as the movie goes on, she finds herself casually sliding closer to him anyway. They're not quite cuddling, or anything, but their shoulders, sides, and legs are touching, which is something.

Mike casually lies out his hand between them, and, heart racing in her chest, El places her hand next to his. They're not holding hands, more like, brushing fingertips, but neither pulls away for the rest of the movie, even during Han and Leia's steamy romantic scenes that leave both Mike and El blushing furiously.

As the movie continues, Max doesn't make any sarcastic remarks. Instead, she's completely captivated by the action, drama, and suspense. When Darth Vader reveals himself to be Luke's father in the climax, both she and El completely lose it.

"Holy shit!" Max exclaims excitedly, tugging on Lucas' arm.

El turns to look up at Mike, eyes wide with shock.

"I know!" Mike grins, "It's like, the biggest reveal in all of cinematic history."

Max is still shaking Lucas, so he pulls his arm away to grasp both of her hands. "Calm down!" Lucas instructs, blushing.

"Sorry," Max replies, breathless.

El hears someone clear their throat ever-so-subtly, and she looks over to see Will locking eyes with her.

*Their hands*, he mouths, rolling his eyes towards Lucas and Max.

El frowns in confusion, but sure enough, when she glances back at the pair, she can see that their hands are still tightly grasped together as they continue watching the movie.

El holds back a gasp as she looks at Will excitedly, both exchanging conspiratorial grins.

"Is everything ok?" Mike whispers, leaning closer to El.

El looks around the comfy basement, at Max, Lucas, Dustin, and Will, and then back up at Mike.

"Yes," she replies truthfully, "Everything is perfect."

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The only sport more asinine to Mike than football would have to be dodgeball. Then again, is dodgeball even a sport?

Mike doesn't honestly know, nor does he care. All he knows is that it sucks. His Gym teacher makes them play it at least once a week, because it's "good cardio." In Mike's not-so-humble opinion, the only thing it's good for is getting his ass kicked by Troy.

None of Mike's friends are in the class with him, which means he's completely vulnerable. There's no one to make sure that Mike isn't always picked last for teams, no one for him to slack off with, and most importantly, no one to stop Troy and his friends from constantly pummeling dodgeballs at him.

Thankfully, Mike manages to catch a break during Wednesday's gym class. Their teacher decides to pick the teams for once, which means that not only is Mike not picked last, but he's also placed on the same team as Troy.

As much as Troy hates Mike, Mike knows that Troy loves winning things even more. So, there was like, no way that he'd come after his own team member, right?

Wrong.

Mike doesn't care to put any effort into dodgeball. He instead prefers to keep one dodgeball on him at all times, hang back on the sidelines, and use the dodgeball as a shield to deflect any incoming attacks.

As Mike continues to do this during today's game, he realizes that it may be the reason he's always picked last.

As he contemplates this, he noticing that Troy is running over to him, flanked by two of his cronies.

Mike bites down on his lower lip and readies himself. *This can't be good.*

"Hey, Frogface," Troy smirks, sidling up to Mike.

Mike eyes him. "What do you want?"

"Just to talk," Troy says innocently, though the jaded edge of his voice suggests the exact opposite.

"Then talk," Mike replies flatly.

"Is it true you're hanging around with El Hopper?" Troy asks.

Mike tenses. "Yeah, why?"

Troy and his friends turn to look at each other and snicker. "Well, we just wanted to congratulate you, buddy," Troy continues, turning back to Mike.

Mike's brow furrows. "Congratulate me? For what?"

"For finally getting some action," Troy simpers, "We didn't think that you had it in you."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Mike asks indignantly, though deep down he's pretty sure that he already knows. He can feel a sick, twisted feeling start to churn in his gut, a feeling that only grows worse when Troy starts smirking again.

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about," Troy says, earning another round of sniggers from his friends.

"I don't," Mike insists, scowling at them.

"Wasn't she homeschooled until she was like, 11 or something? Her dad's the Chief of Police and all he does is keep her locked up half the time."

"So?!"

"So, she's desperate and lonely enough to let you do whatever you want to her," Troy explains, a wicked glint in his eye, "Freaky chicks like that always are."

Mike feels a sudden and sharp surge of anger burst within him. His grip on the dodgeball he's holding tightens. "Don't talk about her like that!"

"Why? Everyone knows it's true! No sense being a prude about it, Wheeler. Why else would she be hanging around with a guy like you?"

"Shut up!" Mike snaps.

"I bet she's into some really weird shit, ain't she?" Troy croons, "Jesus, Wheeler, I'm almost jealous of ya'. Maybe after she gets bored with you, I'll see how far I can get with her, if you know what I mean."

"I said *shut up!*!" Mike says roughly.

"I heard she was all over Greg McCorkle at Jennifer's party," Troy continues, speaking to his friends now, "So it wouldn't even be that hard, ya' know? I mean, if Wheeler can get her horizontal, I'm pretty sure anyone can."

Troy's friends are absolutely beside themselves with laughter. Troy turns away from Mike to smirk back at them and exchange a couple high-fives.

Consequently, they don't notice how much Mike is shaking. How narrowed his eyes are. How fast his heart is pounding, filling his

nerves with enraged adrenaline.

Most importantly, they don't notice when Mike swings his arm back and uses every ounce of strength within him to pummel his dodgeball directly at Troy's face.

The dodgeball hits him with a satisfying *smack* that causes Troy to slip and fall right on his ass.

"Holy shit!" His friends gasp.

There's an audible gasp to be heard from the rest of the students who saw the whole encounter happen. For the people who didn't see, including their Gym teacher, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what occurred.

Mike is still standing over Troy, eyes narrowed, while Troy gives off an angry shout of pain.

"My nose!" Troy wails, clutching at his face, "He got my fucking nose!"

The next thing Mike knows, the gym teacher is storming over to them and grabbing Mike by the arm. "Detention, Wheeler!" He barks, starting to drag Mike out of the gym.

"He started it!" Mike insists, but it falls on deaf ears.

Troy rises to his feet, shaking. His nose is bright red and swollen, and sporting a fresh nosebleed. "You're dead," he seethes, locking eyes with Mike, "*You are so dead.*"

He lunges forward, fists swinging, but his friends jump in to hold him back. "Not now!" One of them snaps, motioning to the gym teacher.

The gym teacher orders Troy to control himself while he 'hauls Wheeler's ass to the principal's office.' Mike, still quietly fuming, doesn't try to escape.

As the gym doors swing open, he can still hear Troy furiously calling out to him.

"You're dead meat, Wheeler!" Troy snaps, writhing in his friends' grasp, "You hear me?! *This isn't over!*"

In response, Mike manages to flip him off before the gym doors shut behind him.

In short, it was a much more climatic way to get detention than selling test answers. Sadly, how he winds up in detention has no effect on how boring detention itself is.

After school, he's back in the same dingy classroom and seated in the same rickety desk, only this time, he's alone.

Mr. Mortensen is supervising again, looking just as thrilled to be here as he was last time. He keeps himself busy with another crossword puzzle from the Hawkins Post, choosing to ignore Mike for the most part. The only time they speak is when Mr. Mortensen looks up and asks Mike what a four-letter word for 'blank Skywalker' is.

"Luke," Mike replies tiredly, "Luke Skywalker."

"Oh," Mortensen says indifferently, turning back to his crossword.

It feels like a million years later, but the clock finally strikes 4:30 and he's then free to leave.

Mike darts out of the rickety desk, offering a hasty, obligatory goodbye to Mr. Mortensen.

Much to his surprise, upon exiting the classroom, Mike sees El waiting for him in the hallway.

She's up against some lockers, but upon seeing Mike she rises to her feet to greet him. "Mike!"

"El?!" Mike exclaims, shocked, "What are you doing here?"

"I heard that you got detention," El explains.

Mike feels his face grow hot. "Oh, uh, yeah, I did."

El eyes him. "Why?"

"I...I kinda..."

"What?"

Mike sighs. "I threw a dodgeball at Troy's face and made his nose bleed. On purpose. I mean, the bleeding part wasn't on purpose, just the throwing part. But yeah."

El's eyes widen. A small, disbelieving smile tugs at her the corners of her lips. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Mike hesitates. There's no way that he's gonna repeat what Troy said. It was too crude and too terrible and El didn't deserve to hear any of it. At the same time, what other explanation was there?

Even though Mike knows that he's not directly responsible for what happened to El at the party, he can't help but put some of the blame on his own shoulders. If he had arrived sooner, maybe she wouldn't have taken that drink. If he'd told everyone to leave earlier, they wouldn't have witnessed the fight and El wouldn't have fainted from fear.

He knows that he could've done something that night to keep El safer, but he didn't. Instead, he wasn't thinking ahead and she got hurt.

He's never going to let that happen again, and he needs her to know this.

"Troy was just...," Mike begins carefully, "Being an asshole. He started saying all these things about you that weren't true."

"What things?" El asks, frowning.

"You know, just stupid shit," Mike says, waving it aside, "Stuff that wasn't right or appropriate or whatever."

"Oh," El mumbles. He's pretty sure that she understands what he's

getting at. She thinks on this for a moment before glancing up at him.  
"Is that why you hit him?"

Mike nods. "I wasn't just going to sit there and let him talk about you like that. It's not right. It's not right and it's sick and awful and...and I just don't want you to get hurt again, or feel bad about anything, ever!"

"Mike," El softens, looking up at him adoringly.

"It's true!" Mike continues, "You're one of my best friends, and best friends always have to have each other's backs. I'm not going to let anyone like Greg or Troy ever hurt you."

El smiles, steps closer, and for a hopeful moment, Mike wonders if she's going to kiss him.

She doesn't.

Instead, she wraps her arms around his torso in a gentle hug, tucking her head under his chin and burying her face into his chest.

Mike is slightly taken aback, but he returns the hug gratefully.

"We're friends," El says simply, speaking into his chest.

"Yeah," Mike replies. He rests his chin on the top of her head, closing in his eyes in contentment.

"Best friends."

"Best friends."

It's a surprisingly happy ending to an otherwise shitty day. In this private moment between the two of them, just hugging in a quiet, secluded hallway in Hawkins High, he feels safe. Like there's nothing that Troy could possibly do to him, not when Mike has El.

Tomorrow, he'll find out just how wrong he is.

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[A/N]: Dun, dun, dunnnnn. What a cliffhanger? What will happen

next? Who knows? Stay tuned!

Also, sidenote, if any of you guys are looking for some tubular tunes, I've actually made a playlist for Everybody Talks! It features songs that helped inspired the story, and all of the 80's songs featured within the story itself! Feel free to check it out! You can find the link in my bio!

## 10. The Fight

In the fall of 1975, Mike started his first day of kindergarten. He didn't know anyone and consequently was terrified. His mother assured him that he'd make friends, but Mike wasn't too certain.

In retrospect, he shouldn't have doubted his mother, as he befriended Will, Lucas, and Dustin within their first month of school. How they all met was a little unusual — they didn't really choose to be friends, rather, they became friends by default. They were the ones outcasted by the other, bigger, cooler kids. Kids like Troy.

Mike and Will became friends when Troy pushed Will off a swing during recess. After Troy had left, Mike had hurried to Will's side, asked if he was okay, and helped him to the nurse's office.

Mike and Will became friends with Lucas when Troy broke Lucas' slingshot, also during recess. While Lucas had sulked in the corner of the playground, sniveling over the slingshot's snapped rubber band, Mike and Will had approached him and offered to help fix it.

Mike, Will, and Lucas became friends with Dustin when they overheard Troy mocking him during lunch. Dustin was seated at a lunch table, alone, when Troy and his friends had approached him.

"What kind of freak doesn't have teeth?" Troy had laughed, earning a round of snickers from his jeering friends.

"They're coming in!" Dustin had insisted, "I told you a million times!"

"I told you a million times!" Troy echoed, mimicking Dustin's lisp.

Mike, Will, and Lucas, seated at their own table a couple feet away, exchanged irked frowns. Though they didn't know Dustin personally, not yet, they knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of Troy's bullying.

After Troy gave Dustin a final shove and walked off, the three boys had grabbed their lunches and rushed to join Dustin at his table.

"Hey!" Mike greeted, giving Dustin a friendly smile.

Dustin eyed them suspiciously, wiping away freshly-formed tears.  
"Hi?"

"That's a cool lunchbox," Mike offered, nodding his head towards Dustin's metal Batman lunch box.

Dustin glanced at it, then back up at the other boys. "Thanks," he said, smiling hesitantly.

"Do you wanna be friends with us?" Will asked.

Dustin smiled wider, nodded, and it was as simple as that.

From that moment on, the four were inseparable. They were friends because they had no one else, they were the "other" category on the hierarchy of elementary school. And yet, they quickly discovered that they had more in common than they initially thought. They all loved looking at X-Men comics even if they were still struggling to read all the words, and they all preferred to role-play fantasy scenarios when the rest of the kids wanted to play kickball during recess.

They had each other's backs through the bad (Dustin's father leaving, and then Will's, Troy's ceaseless torments) and the good (winning the science fair in 5th grade, going to see Star Wars for the first time, planning their first ever Dungeons and Dragons campaign).

They also had each other's backs when it came to dealing with other kids. Since Hawkins was such a small town, everyone basically knew everyone, which meant it was easy for the boys to identify which of their classmates were kinda weird, but mostly fine (Max Mayfield, Jennifer Hayes) and which were obvious threats to be avoided (Troy, Troy's friends).

They helped each other establish a hierarchy, as Dustin would eventually label it, and learned their place in it. It was a rigid system that only grew more so as they became older, a system based on rumors and reputations.

In the fall of 1981, a new girl joined their 6th-grade class. Mike and the guys didn't know anything about her, but, according to what Troy had said in the locker room before Gym class, she was a "total

"weirdo" who was probably in a cult, or something.

The boys, off in their own secluded corner of the locker room, overheard this and turned to look at each other curiously.

"Do you think that's true?" Will quietly asked as the boys tied their sneakers.

"I dunno, I don't even know what she looks like," Mike shrugged back.

"I saw her," Dustin said, "She did look kinda freaky. Her hair was all slicked back, and she was wearing all these dark clothes, and it was really weird."

"That doesn't mean she's in a cult," Will frowned.

"It just means she's a weirdo," Lucas said dismissively, "Does it really matter? It's not like we're ever gonna have to talk to her anyway."

"We never should talk to her, even if we have to," Dustin stated, "Otherwise, we could like, get sacrificed in some weird cult ritual."

"She's probably not in a cult!" Will repeated, giving Dustin an exasperated look.

"Will's right," Mike agreed, "We shouldn't listen to stupid rumors, especially from Troy. We all know what he's said about us, what he's called us."

The other boys fell silent, frowning resignedly.

*Frog-Face. Midnight. Toothless. Fairy.*

"You're right," Lucas admitted somberly. "We shouldn't listen to him."

"Let's talk about something else," Dustin suddenly suggested, looking uncomfortable, "Like...our science fair project! We need an idea, otherwise, we're totally screwed."

"I was thinking we could do Volcanic Eruptions," Lucas offered, "We could make a volcano, and fill it with baking soda, add some vinegar

—"

"The sodium bicarbonate of the baking soda would react with the acetic acid of the vinegar—" Dustin cut in, eyes widening in realization.

"It'd explode everywhere!" Lucas grinned gleefully, "Like lava! Everyone would totally lose their shit!"

"Let's do it!" Mike beamed, "It's going to be so awesome!"

"I could help make the volcano!" Will said eagerly, "My mom just got me some new art supplies!"

"We could all go to the library together and research!" Mike added.

As the boys continued to make plans on how they'd all work together to complete their volcanoes project, all worries were forgotten for the time being. When they had each other, they didn't have to worry about bullies.

Mike never thought that he'd be grateful to Troy for anything, but he had to admit, he would always be grateful that, in his own twisted way, Troy had brought them closer together.

In an even more twisted way, Troy would continue to do so 4 years later, when Mike started to fall for the total weirdo that was kind of in a cult—

Or something.

---

During Thursday's Biology class, Mrs. Hawthorne introduces the big presentation project that they'll be working on for the rest of the semester.

"You'll be working with a partner to further investigate one of the topics we've covered this semester," She explains, pointing to a list of topics she has written on the chalkboard, "You can choose any topic you like, but it needs to be substantial enough for a five-page research paper and a 10-minute oral presentation."

Mike's trying his best to stay focused, but the entire time that Mrs. Hawthorne's talking, Mike can feel Troy giving him a death glare. Even though Mike refuses to look back, he can feel it creeping across his spine, making his hair stand on end.

Mike's been doing his best to avoid Troy all day, but it's been difficult. During breaks, he had to hide out in the restrooms like a moron. During Gym class, he avoided changing in the locker rooms at the same time as everyone else by pretending that he *really* needed to talk to his Gym teacher about how he could "become a better team player" and "work on his attitude."

But now, during Biology class, there's no avoiding Troy. Though Mike definitely doesn't regret giving Troy what he deserves, he admittedly isn't enjoying the aftermath of the decision.

As Mrs. Hawthorne continues to share the details of their upcoming project, Mike can't help but start to feel nervous. Well, *nervous-er*. What if he gets assigned Troy as his partner? He'd be totally screwed. He'd literally die.

Mike chews on his lower lip as he considers this. His foot starts to drum on the floor as he starts planning ways he can mysteriously disappear, fake his death, and rejoin school under a new identity.

Fortunately, that plan isn't necessary.

"Since this project is going to be so time-consuming," Mrs. Hawthorne continues, "I will be allowing you to pick your partners."

Mike perks up at once. They'd get to PICK their partners? That means

---

He turns to glance over his shoulder and is elated to see that El is already smiling back at him. He gives her a questioning look and El nods back in response.

After their teacher finishes describing the assignment, she allows the students to pick their partners and decide what topic they'll be exploring. As soon as she allows everyone to get started, all the student rise out of their desks and rush to their friends. Mike

maneuvers towards the back of the room, coming to a stop at El's desk.

"Hey!" He beams excitedly.

"Hi!" She smiles.

"So, we're working together, right?" Mike asks hopefully.

"Actually, I really wanted to work with Troy," El says flatly.

For a moment, Mike blanches, but then El bursts into giggles, and Mike flushes red instead. "You're hilarious," he says with an eye roll.

El's laughter dies down as she takes a steady breath to compose herself. "I want to work with you," she assures him, giving him a serious look, "Why wouldn't I?"

"I dunno," Mike shrugs, "The last time we worked together, I almost got us covered in frog guts."

"But we got a good grade," El reminds him. She pauses, then adds, "And it was fun."

As her eyes meet his, she gives him a soft, gentle smile, and Mike suddenly feels that weird aura again, the one that always leaves him feeling mystified at just how pretty she is and cute and funny and smart and just *amazing*.

"Yeah," he says thickly, not looking away, "It was really fun."

El's smile grows larger and she ducks her head shyly. The loss of eye contact breaks Mike's stupor as he's suddenly reminded of the fact that they're in Biology class, along with 20 or so of their classmates, and that they're supposed to be picking a project topic.

"Uh, so," he says, clearing his throat and looking back towards the chalkboard, "What topic do you wanna do?"

"Right," El blushes, looking towards the board as well. She considers it for a moment, looking a little uncertain. "I'm not sure," she finally admits, "Which do you want?"

"We can do whatever you want to."

"I don't know what I want, Mike."

"Fine, then," Mike sighs, giving in. He examines the board for a moment, weighing all his options before he turns back to El. "Why don't we do...uh...Human Genetics? You know, with like, all the chromosomes and Mendel charts and stuff?"

"Okay," El nods, not looking at him, but rather, something at the other side of the classroom.

"Awesome, so, we should probably start researching right away," Mike suggests, "We could go to the library, after school, if you want?"

"Okay," El says again, still not looking at Mike.

Mike frowns, "Is everything okay?"

El flinches and quickly looks back at him. "Yes!" She says a little too quickly, a little too anxiously.

Mike gives her a wary look. "What were you looking at?"

El hesitates, before admitting, "Troy. He keeps staring at us."

Mike looks across to the other side of the classroom, where Troy is chatting with one of his friends. His nose is still a little red and covered with a large band-aid, and when he sees that Mike is looking at him, he gives him a dark, threatening glare.

Mike swallows and looks back to El, trying to appear indifferent. "Whatever," he says, shrugging, "I don't care about him."

El gives him a doubtful look. "You don't?"

"Yeah," Mike insists, "He's just being an idiot."

"A mouth-breather," El jokes, causing Mike to smile.

"Yeah, a mouth-breather," he nods.

The two exchange wry smiles before they proceed to make plans to

study after school. The two agree to meet at the bike rack again, Biology class ends, and they both depart for their 7th-period classes.

As Mike sits through his last class of the day, all he can do is hope that this library venture will go better than he and El's last one.

After school, they meet at the bike rack, just as planned.

El smiles excitedly as she approaches him, her arms swinging at her sides as she walks. She looks so *happy*, which makes Mike really happy, and he just has to keep reminding himself to not screw things up this time.

"Let's go!" El says, giving Mike a quick hug before grabbing his bike.

Mike, still blushing from the hug, takes a moment for his mouth to catch up to his brain. "Don't you wanna, uh, skateboard to the library?" He asks, eyeing her as El mounts his bike.

"I forgot my board at home," El innocently replies.

Mike eyes her suspiciously. He's pretty certain that he saw Max and El skateboard into the school parking lot this morning. In fact, he's almost 100% sure of it, because he and the guys had been talking outside before school started, and seeing the girls skateboarding had made Lucas laugh about the time Dustin fell off Max's skateboard, and that made Dustin laugh about the time Max destroyed Lucas in Dig-Dug, and that made them start fighting, and then Mike and Will had to break up the wrestling match that broke out between them.

Mike looks her over for a moment, but El only gives him an expectant smile, and Mike suddenly realizes that if El really does have her skateboard here, she's choosing to ride with him instead.

*Oh.*

Mike feels himself blush harder, though he tries to maintain a cool composure. "Okay, then," he says, climbing onto the bike in front of her.

El grabs onto his sleeves just as she had before, and then they're off.

The bike ride is just as quiet as their first one, but just as cozy. As he bikes down the leave-strewn streets of downtown Hawkins, Mike can't help but reflect on just how lucky he is. A little less than a month ago, the highlight of Mike's week had included making 15 bucks off the History test he sold to a hungover upperclassman. Today, he's getting to spend one-on-one time with the literally the coolest girl at Hawkins High, who, as of Tuesday night, had said that he was cute.

They arrive at the library and leave Mike's bike in the bushes as usual. When they enter the building, Marissa, seated behind her desk as always, gives them a wary look, but both Mike and El give her reassuring smiles in return.

"We'll be quiet!" Mike assures, speaking in a whisper.

"Promise!" El adds.

Marissa still looks hesitant, but nods, turning her attention back to the book she's currently reading.

Mike and El make their way to the science section and grab all the books on genetics that they can find. They find a table in the back of the library and get to work, each picking a book to read and sharing any useful information they find with each other.

They work until sunset, a point at which their brains feel overloaded with information and their eyes hurt from reading so much.

"I think we got enough for today," Mike says with a sigh, shutting his book shut.

El nods gratefully. "I have a headache," she mutters, slumping back in her seat.

Mike looks out the window at the fading dusk sky and gives her a hesitant smile. "Do you want me to bike you home this time? I know you said your house isn't far, but, I mean..." His voice trails off weakly as he realizes he doesn't have a better excuse than wanting to spend more time with her, which seems like a totally lame thing to say.

To his relief, instead of deflecting like she did last time, El chooses to smile at him instead. "Okay," she says, giving a small shrug.

Mike tries (and fails) to not grin like an idiot. "Okay."

They pack up their things, put the science books back on the shelves, and head back outside together. The evening is brisk and the glow of the sunset makes both of their faces look pink.

"It's so cold," El comments, rubbing her arms as Mike digs his bike out of the bushes.

"Yeah," Mike agrees, yanking his bike out and onto the pavement. "I hate how—" As he gets a good look at his bike, his voice cuts off abruptly.

"What?" El asks, peering at Mike curiously.

"Somebody slashed my bike's tires!" Mike responds, pointing it out to El.

"What?!" El says again, frowning in concern.

"Yeah!" Mike snaps bitterly, glaring at the deep gashes that run across each tire, "They're completely ruined! There's no way that this was an accident!"

"Who would do that?" El asks, knitting her brow in confusion.

Their eyes meet, and it only takes a moment for them both to come to an answer.

"Troy," they both mutter, exchanging defeated looks.

"Of course," Mike continues, letting out a heavy sigh, "He probably overheard us during Biology, when we said we were going to meet here."

"Why does he hate you so much?" El queries, shaking her head forlornly.

"I dunno," Mike mutters, "But he always has."

"He's always mean to you and our friends," El continues, looking increasingly angry, "He locked Dustin into his locker, he calls us names, he —"

"I know," Mike cuts her off, not really wanting a play-by-play of some of the worst memories of his life, "I don't like it either, okay? But it's been happening since we were literally in kindergarten, so it's not like there's anything we can do to change it."

"It's not fair," El glowers.

"It's not," Mike agrees.

They fall silent for a minute, then Mike states the obvious.

"I guess I can't bike you home."

El looks up at him, anger dissolving at his saddened expression. "No," she admits, "But you could walk me."

Mike brightens. "Really?"

"Yes," El replies, giving him a soft smile, "Let's go."

She starts walking off down the sidewalk, and Mike doesn't need to be told twice to follow her.

As they walk further away from the downtown Hawkins area, the number of streetlights and passing cars become fewer and far between. They continue walking onto a wooded trail that El claims leads back to her house.

Mike holds onto his handlebars as he walks his broken bike beside her. El starts talking more about their Biology project, something about how nervous she is about the speech they're going to have to give in front of the class, though Mike has to admit he isn't really listening. He's too distracted by the way her skin is still glowing in the warm light of the sunset, the way her lips curve nervously as she talks quietly, carefully. The way a stray curl has escaped from her ever-slicked back hair and instead frames her face in a petite spiral.

El notices the way he's staring at her and stops talking. "What?" She

asks, smiling at him self-consciously.

Mike can't think of any words that would give justice to all the thoughts running through his head right now. Instead, he only shakes his head wordlessly at her, unable to stop himself from smiling.

"Just...you," he says, hoping El doesn't think that he sounds like an idiot.

"Me?" El murmurs, looking a little confused, yet hopeful at the same time

Mike nods.

Their eyes meet as they slowly stop walking, coming to a complete stop.

El studies his face, gaze soft, and for a moment, Mike feels as if they're suspended in time, gazes locked, each daring the other to make the first move.

And then that moment ends.

They hear the crack of a tree branch snapping in two, and both turn with a start to see someone emerging from the trees, walking towards them.

*Troy.*

His posture is stiff and tense and his face is hardened with a steely glare. El's breath hitches as he strides determinedly towards them, and Mike takes a protective step closer to her.

"Mike," El murmurs, voice shaky.

"Don't worry," Mike assures her, "I won't let him hurt you."

El starts to say something but is abruptly cut off.

"Well, well, well," Troy sneers, coming to a stop in front of Mike and El, "Look who it is: the freaks."

This time, Mike doesn't have to ask what Troy wants. Troy had made it explicitly clear that their argument during Gym class wasn't going to be the end of it.

Surprisingly, he doesn't feel as afraid as he thought he'd feel. Instead, he keeps thinking back to what El said at the library, about how Troy treated him wasn't fair. Mike had never done anything to warrant this level of bullying, and as that realization sets in, he finds himself growing increasingly frustrated. He shouldn't have to spend the rest of his life hiding in bathrooms or with his Gym teacher.

*"It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair."*

"Go away, Troy," Mike says coldly, grasping the handlebars of his bike tightly.

As the sun continues to set in the sky, the pink light is steady fading to a deep orangey-red. The vibrant light highlights and shadows Troy's face, making his damaged nose even more prominent.

At Mike's order, Troy only scoffs. "Go away'? Seriously, Wheeler?" He scowls, "I mean, I always knew you were dense, but I didn't think you were this completely stupid."

"Leave us alone, Troy!" El pleads anxiously.

*"Stay out of this!"* Troy barks, causing El to flinch back.

She's scared. Mike can see it in the way her eyes are widening, the way she steps closer to Mike nervously. He suddenly flashes back to Jennifer Hayes' party, when El had been so scared that she'd passed out. Mike can't let that happen again. He has to keep her safe.

"Don't yell at her!" Mike orders angrily.

"You don't tell me what to do, *Frog Face*," Troy sneers, stepping closer to Mike. "And you don't get to push me around, either."

"I don't push you around!" Mike insists, not backing down.

*"You broke my fucking nose!"*

*"You deserved it!"*

"*Why? Because I told the truth about your freak of a girlfriend?*" Troy snorts.

*"Because it's not true! Because I'm sick of you picking on me and my friends!"*

"Mike, stop!" El insists, grasping onto his arm.

Mike only ignores her, shrugging her off. "You slashed my tires!" He snaps accusingly, glaring at Troy.

"Of course I did!" Troy derides, "I had to make sure that you were here for the big show!"

"The show!?"

"I told you that you were dead meat," Troy reminds him threateningly, "I wasn't pussy-footing around, Wheeler."

"Then go ahead and get it over with!" Mike says brusquely, trying to sound as tough as possible. Thankfully, he doesn't have to try too hard. Mike's sick of being pushed around by Troy. He's been doing nothing but stopping and running and hiding his entire life, and he's more than ready for things to change. He's not going to let Troy push him around, not anymore, and especially not in front of El.

He can feel adrenaline pulsating through him again, just as it had before he'd thrown the dodgeball. If it's a fight Troy wants, then it's a fight he'll get.

"There's no teachers around to protect you now, Wheeler," Troy warns, hands balling into fists, "And there's no way your weirdo girlfriend is going to protect you, either."

"So what?" Mike scorns, "I don't need them."

"*Mike!*" El says again, sounding frantic.

Mike forces himself to block her out. Even though he's never been in a real, physical fight before, he knows that he can't fail. He needs to

stick up for himself once and for all.

And so, Mike lets go of his handlebars, pushes his bike off to the side, raises his fists, and readies himself for whatever comes next.

As it turns out, what comes next is a punch to the face.

Troy swings first, his fist landing into Mike's jaw before Mike can even think to defend himself. Surprisingly, Mike doesn't feel the harsh, crushing pain that he'd expect, but rather, a blinding numbness. Stars burst in front of his eyes as Troy swings back and punches him again, this time landing a blow against Mike's temple, and then to his ear.

Mike feels his ears pop, and suddenly everything sounds muddled and distant — like his head is submerged underwater.

From somewhere that sounds far away, he can hear El crying out.  
*"Stop it! You're hurting him!"*

Mike grits his teeth and lunges forward, swinging his fists wildly, clobbering every inch of Troy that he can reach. He manages to land a punch directly into Troy's gut, causing him to double over in pain, but it doesn't matter. Troy is stronger, tougher, and has probably done this before. Even while doubled over, he delivers a swift kick to Mike's shins and sends Mike crumbling to his knees.

*"STOP!"* El shrieks, sounding further and further away.

Mike and Troy tackle each other to the ground, each spitting curses at the other as they continue to punch, kick, and clobber one another.

With a walloping blow to the head, Troy gains the upper hand and manages to pin Mike to the ground. Mike can feel his head sink into the damp, muddy grass as Troy proceeds to bash Mike's head in with his fists — over and over and over again.

Each punch is relentless, and each punch causes Mike's vision to grow blurrier and blurrier. Through the muffled and distant sounds he's able to hear, there's a ringing in his ears that only grows stronger with each pulverizing blow.

As a warm and metallic taste suddenly bursts in Mike's mouth, he idly becomes aware of the fact that not only is he losing this fight, but he's losing badly.

Troy bashes his head to the left, and then to the right.

The ringing in Mike's ears is growing louder and louder, and then he realizes it's not a ringing at all, but a scream. A high-pitched, anguished, piercingly loud *scream*.

Without warning, Troy is immediately yanked off of Mike and launched into the air. He flies backward as if he weighed nothing at all — as if he was pulled by a large magnetic force.

Mike blinks, trying to see what happened, but the world keeps spinning and teetering back and forth, and he can barely sit up straight. He manages to make out the shape of Troy lying in the grass a couple feet away, clutching his arm and howling in pain.

Mike frowns, at first wondering if he's seeing things, but Troy only continues to howl, his cries sounding underwater-y again.

Thoroughly confused, Mike looks around for El, worried that she might have fainted from being scared, but is instead shocked to see that she's actually standing over Troy, arm outstretched, eyes burning with anger.

"W-what?" Mike mumbles faintly, coughing up a mouthful of blood.

"My ARM!" Troy wails, his anguished cries melding with the persistent ringing in Mike's ear. "*She broke my fucking arm!*"

El only continues to glare at Troy, seemingly indifferent to his bawling distress. "Leave," she orders simply, "Now."

"You freak!" Troy spits, shakily rising to his feet. "You're insane! You're INSANE!"

"If you tell anyone," El commands, voice cold, "I'll tell them what you did to Mike."

Mike doesn't hear what Troy says next. The ringing is getting louder,

and their voices sound more and more muffled, more underwater, and as Mike sinks back against the cold grass, he feels like he's drowning.

Darkness ebbs at the corners of his vision as pain begins to set in. Every bone in his body feels like his aching, and all Mike wants to do is fall asleep...if he could only sleep...

*"Mike?!"*

Her voice just manages to drift through his consciousness, and Mike dazedly realizes that El is now leaning over him. Though her face is all blurry and distorted, he's just able to make out the trail of blood that's streaming from her nose...

...just as it had at Jennifer's party.

*"MIKE!"* El gasps, cupping his cheeks.

*"El?"* Mike rasps feebly.

And then everything goes black.

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*Pain.*

It's the first conscious thought Mike has as he awakes, even though it's hardly coherent. But coherent or not, as he opens his eyes, pain is definitely the first thing he's aware of. His head is pounding like he'd bashed it into a wall several times while both listening to heavy metal and having a migraine. His mouth is still dry and tastes of metallic iron. His bones feel weighted down from how sore they are, and it takes every ounce of strength within Mike to even sit up.

When he does, he realizes he's tucked into the bottom bunk of his bed, back in the safety of his home.

He blinks around in confusion, gaze landing on his digital alarm clock.

1 AM.

## *How did he get here?*

Mike groaned and clutches his throbbing head. Memories of his fight with Troy come back as painful, red-toned images. He remembers everything, even the parts that he wishes he didn't. Even the parts that didn't make sense, like Troy flying through the air, El's bloody nose, the way she'd been standing so powerfully, so unblinkingly...

None of it makes any sense. It was so weird and strange and *how had he gotten back to his room and had Troy actually flown and why did he say that SHE had broken his arm when she was standing several feet away?*

He needs to talk to her.

Mike carefully pulls himself out of bed, wincing as he rises to his feet. His room is noticeably chilly and he realizes that someone left his bedroom window open. Though slightly unnerved by this, he proceeds to walk over to his bedroom door and unlock it. Making sure to stay as quiet as possible, he tip-toes out into the hallway, not wanting to wake his family members.

As he makes his way downstairs, he catches sight of his reflection in the hallway mirror. His cheeks, jaw, nose, and temple are patched-up with neon-heart-patterned bandaids, the same kind that his mom had bought for Holly recently. Though his face is clearly dinged up, it feels freshly washed, like someone had scrubbed it clean.

Mike doesn't take time to consider what this all could mean, and instead continues on downstairs. He stumbles into the kitchen, tiredly searching out the Yellow Pages book. When he finds it tucked amongst his mother's cookbooks, he grasps it with both hands and trudges to the family phone.

His eyes take a minute to focus in on the pages, but as soon as he's able to properly distinguish the letters, he flips through the "H" residencies.

*Hopper*, he mentally repeats, *Hopper, Hopper, Hopper*.

Thankfully, there's only one Hopper listed in Hawkins, *Jim*, and Mike

proceeds to dial the number with shaking fingers.

Yes, he knows that it's late. Yes, he knows that El's probably asleep. Yes, he knows that he can barely think, let alone form coherent sentences, but he has to talk to her, he *has* to.

The first time he calls, no one answers. The voicemail operator starts instructing Mike to leave a message, but Mike instead hangs up the phone and dials the number again.

The phone continues to ring without reprieve.

"C'mon, pick up," Mike mutters, tapping his foot.

No answer.

Mike calls a third time, and when he still gets no answer, he decides to comply and leave a voicemail.

"El?" He begins, voice cracking a little, "It's...it's me, Mike. I know you're probably asleep, but...I just need to talk to you, okay? If you're hearing this right now, please pick up. I don't know what's going on and I don't know if you're okay or not and I just..."

His voice breaks off helplessly, hopelessly. He doesn't know what to say, he doesn't know what to think.

"Just please, tell me what's going on," Mike mumbles hoarsely, "I need to know. I need to know what happened and you're the only one who can help."

He stops, desperately waiting for someone to pick up the phone.

A minute passes.

Mike clutches the receiver tighter, exhaustion slowly overwhelming him. "El?" He pleads despairingly, "Are you there?"

He hears the crackle of phone static, but nothing more.

## 11. Eleven

[A/N]: I don't know a more subtle way to announce this, but we are reaching the end of this story! There's going to be 15 chapters in all, plus an Epilogue, for a total of 16 installments. Thank you in advance for reading, following, favoriting, and commenting! This story has been an absolute blast to write, and I couldn't do it without your support.

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El's no stranger to nightmares. She's been having them since she was little, ever since she left the lab. Though the specific events of her nightmares change, the subject matter is always the same. It always has to do with the lab. There's always the bitingly chemical smell of disinfectant. The feeling of cold steel against her palms and icy tiles against her feet. She feels trapped, afraid.

As she was only 4 years old when she escaped, she's not sure if the nightmares she has of the lab are memories or worries. However, she does know that no matter what, she's always able to wake herself up. All she has to do is close her eyes and scream, and she'll awake in her bed, safe, yet shaking.

As she stands in the middle of the wooded trail on the outskirts of Hawkins, hands clamped shut, shaking, helplessly watching Mike and Troy fight each other, she feels like she's having another nightmare. But this nightmare is different: even though she feels just as trapped and afraid, instead of disinfectant, she smells damp earth, dead leaves, and fresh blood. And most importantly, when she starts to scream, she doesn't wake up.

Troy has Mike pinned to the ground. As he repeatedly bashes Mike's head in, El feels her anger boiling faster, hotter. It rushes through her veins and makes her see nothing but red. Her scream of fear turns into one of pure fury as she thrusts out her hand and uses her powers to launch Troy off of Mike.

Troy rockets backward, landing onto the ground with a heavy thud.  
*"What the hell!?"*

He turns to glare up at El, and with a quick crack of her neck, El hears the satisfying snap of his arm bone breaking in two.

Troy howls in pain as he moves to clutch at his injury. "My ARM!" He wails, "She broke my fucking arm!"

El tries not to smile as she eyes him indifferently. As satisfying as it is to see Troy in pain, she's still seething over the fact that he even *dared* to try and hurt Mike.

Leave," she orders, still glaring at him, "Now."

Troy shakily rises to his feet and glares at her. "You freak! You're insane! You're INSANE!"

It suddenly dawns on El that she just used her powers, not once, but twice, in front of one of her classmates. Two classmates, technically. She feels a sharp spike of fear stab her in the gut, but she swallows it back quickly. She doesn't have time to be afraid, not yet.

"If you tell anyone," she instead commands, "I'll tell them what you did to Mike."

Troy's eyes widen. Everyone knows that El's dad is the chief of police, and Troy, one of Hawkins' up-and-coming star athletes, can't afford to get arrested—

— Or another broken bone, for that matter.

Both threats seem fully realized to Troy, as he doesn't protest further. Instead, he gives El one final scowl before taking off into the woods, leaving her and Mike alone at last.

As soon as Troy's gone, El lets her hand drop. She releases the breath that she just realizes she's been holding this entire time. A fresh trail of blood streams from her nose, but she feels too exhausted to wipe it away. She can feel a headache coming on as she reflects on everything that just happened, including everything that happened to

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There's a faint, whimpered cry of pain, and El feels her heart stop.

"Mike?!"

He's still splayed out in the grass where Troy left him. El's eyes widen as she rushes to kneel beside him. Her knees sink into the damp grass, muddy her jeans.

Mike's still breathing, but barely. His face is bruised and covered in dirt. There's blood, *so much blood*. It runs out from under his nose, blooms from his lips, and dribbles down his chin. His dark, exceptionally soft hair is now littered with twigs and leaves.

He's broken, impossibly broken.

El feels her heart shatter into a million pieces as she gently cups his cheeks. "*MIKE!*" She gasps, thumbs wiping away the blood streaming from his nose.

His eyes are struggling to stay focused, but when she says his name, he manages to meet her gaze for a brief moment.

"*El?*" He rasps.

But then his eyes close, his body falls limp, and he doesn't say anything more.

It's a nightmare, it has to be.

El squeezes her eyes shut tight, trying to wake herself up, but when she opens them again, Mike is still unconscious, still lying in her arms, and still *hurt* because of her. He was trying to protect her and he got beat up and it was all her fault and—

She takes a shaky, rattling breath, trying to calm herself. There's no time for this. She has to get him help. She has to get him to safety.

El glances around, making sure that no one is nearby, and uses her powers to levitate Mike so that he's positioned upright, feet hovering ever-so-slightly off the ground. She carefully slings his arm over her shoulder, hoping it'll look like Mike is simply walking slumped against her. Before she leaves, she summons his bike off the ground and brings it over to her. Grasping the bike's handlebars tightly, she begins walking in pursuit of Mike's house.

As lanky as Mike is, managing his weight while pushing his bike along is very strenuous for El, and it requires constant support from her powers. Nevertheless, she trudges on, stopping only to wipe her continuously bleeding nose.

The entire time, she can feel a pit of sadness growing deeper within her. It's like a black hole, consuming her emotions and her drive, and as she continues walking, it only grows bigger. Her eyes burn and she feels like she wants to cry, but there's no time. She has to keep moving.

The night is growing colder as the sunset continues to fade. This proves to be helpful, as the darkness helps shield the odd sight of El walking a slumped-over Mike and a broken bike from view.

She remembers where his house is from Tuesday's movie night. As she comes closer to it, she can see lights streaming from the windows, illuminating his front lawn. Somebody's home.

Her breath catches in her throat as she comes to a stop. If Mike's parents are really inside, she can't just march him in through the front door. He'd get in trouble and she'd have to answer questions that she didn't have acceptable answers to.

She needs another way in.

Her gaze moves to the basement door that's located on the side of his house.

*There.*

With an exerted grunt, El continues to lug Mike down the hill and towards the basement door. Mike still isn't saying anything, and yet his silence is deafening.

El chokes back a cry as she glances at him, at how he's still slumped over lifelessly.

*Please be okay.*

After what feels like ages, she finally reaches the basement door. She quietly lets the bike rest against the side of the house and proceeds to

use her powers to unlock the door.

The basement is quiet, dark, and deserted.

Perfect.

El, making sure to stay as quiet as possible, brings Mike inside and uses her powers to lock the door behind them. She then gently brings Mike to the couch, the same one they'd sat on only two nights ago, and allows his body to fall against it.

She kneels before him, trying to shake him awake. "Mike," she whispers gently, tugging at his arm, "Wake up, please."

The entire situation is so wildly different from the last time they were here together.

When she closes her eyes, she can bring herself right back to Tuesday night. She can feel Mike pressed up against her side, almost, but not quite, holding her hand. She can hear his voice, soft and patient, whispering plot points into her ear.

The memory is brought to a jarring halt by an unexpected shout.

*"TED!"*

El gives a startled jolt as she glances up at the ceiling, where the voice sounds like it came from. She can hear two sets of footsteps creaking against the floorboards as they walk towards the doorway to the basement.

*Shit.*

El holds her breath, preparing to hide, but thankfully, the footsteps continue moving past the basement door.

"Ted!" The voice repeats, "We're leaving!"

El recognizes the voice as Mrs. Wheeler. It sounds like she's moved into the living room, near the front door. El doesn't recognize the voice that replies, but she assumes it's probably Mike's dad.

"Where?" Mr. Wheeler says tiredly.

"Holly has her parent-teacher conferences tonight!" Mrs. Wheeler reminds him warily, "I'm taking her to the elementary school!"

"Oh. Right," Mr. Wheeler replies dully.

Mrs. Wheeler mumbles something incoherent before exiting the house with what sounds to be a little girl, Holly, presumably. There are a couple minutes of silence, followed by the sound of a car pulling out of the driveway.

El breathlessly waits a few minutes, nerves rattled from the feeling of almost being caught. But then she hears the TV turn on, and Mr. Wheeler doesn't move any further.

El anxiously turns to look at Mike. For a moment, she considers leaving him here, but the thought leaves as quickly as it comes. There's no way she can abandon him. What if his parents came down here and found him like this — knocked unconscious and covered in blood? Yeah, that definitely wasn't an option. She has to clean him up, at the very least, if not get him some privacy too.

As the TV continues to play upstairs, El formulates a plan in her head.

She waits a couple more minutes before she finally works up the courage to go through with what she has to do next.

Even though her heart is pounding so hard and loud she's certain that Mr. Wheeler will be able to hear it, she uses her powers to once again levitate Mike off the couch and above her ground. Then, summoning up every ounce of courage she possesses, she carefully guides him up the basement steps.

Every move she makes sounds infinitely louder than usual. The sound of her hand turning the handle of the door to the hallway sounds more like a foghorn. As she moves with Mike down the hallway, the sound of her footsteps against the carpeted floor feel more like huge, clomping stomps.

But the living room TV continues to play, and as El gets closer, she

can also detect the sound of loud snoring too.

*He's asleep.*

This reassures El enough to hurry the rest of the way up the stairs to the second floor, where she assumes the bedrooms are.

She has to peek behind a couple doors (first the bathroom, then his parents' room, and then his sister's) before she finally finds Mike's bedroom. At least, she assumes it's his bedroom. It's the only one that's covered in old movie posters, littered with comic books, and features a bookshelf packed to the brim with novels and science fair trophies.

She knows that now isn't the right time, but she can't help but smile faintly as she enters his room. Everything about it is just so *Mike*, from the crumpled hoodies and sweaters in the corner to the *Empire Strikes Back* poster hanging on the wall. His room even smells like him, which is kind of a totally weird thing to notice, but it's true.

She carefully brings him over to the bottom bunk of his bunk bed and sprawls him across it.

Mike falls limp like a rag doll, totally unfazed from the journey they'd just taken. He's still so lifeless, so completely *broken* looking, for a terrifying moment El wonders if he's even still alive.

The thought sends a cold spike of terror straight to her heart, and she has to hold back a frantic sob as she kneels beside him.

Thankfully, when she leans over him, she can still feel air, warm and faint, just barely brushing against her cheek. He's still breathing.

El feels relieved, but she knows she's still not done yet. She gets up and begins to take off his muddy sneakers, carefully setting them under the bed. She then proceeds to do the same with his windbreaker and then his hoodie, leaving him in a gray t-shirt and jeans.

If Max were here, El knows that she would have some tension-diffusing quip to make about the fact that El was currently undressing Mike in his bedroom. The thought almost makes El smile. Almost.

It just feels impossible to smile when the emotional black hole in her gut keeps getting bigger. With each passing moment, it feels harder to keep going. Her hands are shaking and her eyes are watering and all she wants to do is cry, but she can't. Not now, not yet.

She exits Mike's room, tip-toes back into the bathroom, rummages through the medicine cabinet, and retrieves a box of band-aids. They're admittedly a little girly, being neon and covered in hearts and everything, but at the moment, their design is the least of El's worries. She takes the box, along with a washcloth that she finds and wets in the bathroom sink.

She then returns to Mike's room and begins the task of cleaning him. She wipes his face with the washcloth, scrubbing away every last speck of dirt, blood, and filth. When she finds a new cut underneath the grime, she carefully covers it with a brightly-colored band-aid. She repeats the process over and over until his face is clean and she can see his freckles again.

*There.*

She sets the washcloth aside and cautiously raises her fingers to run them across his freshly-cleaned skin. She's never been this close to him before, never touched him like this.

Maybe that was a good thing.

As El runs her thumb over his bruised lip, she becomes increasingly aware of the fact that this is all her fault. She knows it is. Mike had thrown the dodgeball at Troy because he'd been defending her. Mike got into a fight with Troy because he'd wanted to protect her, he'd said so himself.

*"Don't worry. I won't let him hurt you."*

It was a little infuriating how noble Mike tried to be sometimes. When they were on the trail, El was just about to tell him that too, to tell him that she doesn't need his protection, that she only wants Mike's safety. But then Troy had walked up to them and her chance to say anything was ripped from her grasp.

They'd shared such a wonderful moment before Troy showed up. A wonderful, blissful, glittering moment. If the fight was a living nightmare, then what happened before that was definitely a living daydream.

Mike had met her eyes and in an instant, it felt as if all time had stopped. He looked so captivated by her, so hopelessly enamored, that that's when El knew he wanted to kiss her. He had the same look that all the dreamy guys had before they kissed the heroines in the romance movies she watched.

And oh, how she'd wanted to kiss him. As their eyes met in the light of the fading sunset, she'd never wanted, no, *needed* anything more.

But then the daydream had shattered as abruptly and delicately as glass, all because of her.

Now everything has changed. El knows that if (when?) Mike finds out about her powers, he'll never look at her like that again. He'll see her for what she truly is: a freak, a weirdo, a monster. She can never be normal, which is what Mike deserves. He deserves a normal girlfriend who can give him a happy, safe, normal life.

That's why she has to stop seeing him. This has to be it.

El pulls back the blankets on his bed and gently tucks Mike under the covers, making sure that he's both comfortable and secure.

"I'm sorry," she whispers hoarsely. Her eyes well with tears as she carefully leans down, brushes his hair aside, and presses her lips to his forehead in a chaste kiss.

As she pulls back, examining his face one last time, she promises herself that she won't let this happen again. She's not going to hurt Mike anymore, or let him hurt himself on her behalf.

"Goodbye, Mike," she whispers, meaning it wholeheartedly.

She doesn't want to risk going out the front door, so she instead climbs out his bedroom window and uses her powers to bring herself to the ground. Her feet hit the grass, she starts running, and that's when the black hole consumes her.

She can feel it take over like a dam bursting open. All the tears she's been holding back this entire time come pouring out. But she doesn't stop. She keeps running and running and running until she's back home.

It's long after nightfall now, but thankfully Hopper isn't home yet. She hurries inside, takes the stairs two at a time, and rushes inside her room. She throws herself into her bed and at last, allows herself to cry outwardly. Her sobs are loud, heavy, and wrack her entire body as she buries her face in her pillow.

*Her fault, it's all her fault.*

She cries for what feels like hours, but for all she knows, it could have been far less. She doesn't bother to look at the time, she can hardly bring herself to think anything coherent. She just weeps and hiccups and wails and blubbers endlessly, not stopping until she's successfully cried herself to sleep.

When she manages to fall asleep, she awakens in the Void. El often doesn't have to visit this empty, desolate place, but when she does, she knows that it's for something important. Tonight, that something is Mike.

He's talking to someone over the phone while leaning up against a single wall. Though the rest of their surroundings are nothing but blackness, she can see him clear as day: tired, worn-out, still sporting the band-aids she'd put on him.

*He's okay.*

The realization of relief hits her like a freight train, but her happiness is short-lived. Sure, he may be alive, but he's still hurting because of her.

His lips are moving, but El can't make out what he's saying. She hesitates but cautiously steps closer. Each footstep she takes echoes off into nothingness, making the Void seem only the more vast.

"El?" Mike calls out as she approaches.

El's eyes widen in alarm as she freezes in place. Had he somehow

seen her?

He hadn't. His gaze falls to his feet as he continues talking, voice cracking slightly, "It's...it's me, Mike. I know you're probably asleep, but...I just need to talk to you, okay? If you're hearing this right now, please pick up. I don't know what's going on and I don't know if you're okay or not and I just..."

His voice breaks off as El comes to a stop in front of him. He looks so worried, so completely at a loss for words, and it nearly breaks El's heart.

"Just please, tell me what's going on," Mike mumbles, "I need to know. I need to know what happened and you're the only one who can help."

El looks directly into his eyes, even though she knows that he can't see her. She wants to talk to him. She wants to comfort him. But at the same time, she knows that the best way to help him would be by leaving him alone and letting him live a normal life, it's what he deserves.

His eyes begin to grow distant as his shoulders slump tiredly. "El?" He pleads, "Are you there?"

El can't bear to see him like this. Even if she has to keep her distance, she doesn't want him to worry.

"I'm here, Mike," she murmurs. She reaches out a hand to touch his cheek, but the moment her fingers brush against his skin, the image of him, the phone, and the wall fade from existence.

He vanishes, leaving her fingers cold and misted. El starts to panic as tears stream down her cheeks faster and her heart weighs heavier. She starts to scream, but the sound is swallowed up by the emptiness of the Void, leaving her mouth hung open in a silent cry.

When she wakes up for real on Friday morning, her heart is still pounding and her body is covered in a cold sweat.

It's also 8:15, school has already started, and her dad is shaking her out of bed.

She's late. Again.

This time though, Hopper doesn't look hectic or upset. Instead, he just looks worried. "Is everything okay, kid?" He asks, kneeling beside her bed.

El turns her wide-eyed gaze towards him. Her visit to the Void, along with everything else that happened yesterday, still has her rattled, and the realization that she'd slept passed her alarm isn't really helping. "I-I'm fine," she stammers, trying her best to sound so, "I'm sorry! I didn't hear my alarm and — and..."

"You're fine?" Hopper frowns doubtfully. "I dunno, you look pretty choked up to me."

"I'm not," El assures him, but her voice is so shaky that even she doesn't believe herself.

Hopper examines her face closely, seriously, before speaking again. "Does this have anything to do with that 'Mike' kid?"

El pales. "W-what?"

"He left a voicemail last night," Hopper explains, "He sounded pretty upset."

El swallows and shakes her head. "That was nothing."

"It didn't sound like nothing."

"It was."

Hopper looks her dead-on, not questioning, but countering. "*Really.*"

El forces herself to meet his gaze. "Really," she insists, "I...it doesn't matter. I'm not going to talk to him anymore."

Hopper continues to study her face. He's looking at her the same way he looks at his cold case files — eyes narrowed and brow furrowed. "I thought you said you trusted me," he says carefully.

"I do," El mumbles.

Hopper sighs and runs a hand over his jaw. "Listen, kid, I'm not stupid, okay? I know something's going on with you. Did...did Mike hurt you?"

"No!" El exclaims adamantly, "No, he...he never would."

"Then what was that phone call about?"

El feels like she's facing yet another crossroad. Honesty or lies. Protect herself or protect Mike.

She opens her mouth, ready to spout off another feeble, 'nothing,' but she can't do it. The words die in her throat, and suddenly the idea of lying to her dad just seems so tiring. If she can't be honest with Mike, she at least has to be honest with *someone*.

Her gaze flits down to the blue braided bracelet (hair-tie, really) on her wrist.

She still remembers the day Hopper had given it to her. She was about 5 years old and she'd finally outgrown the awful buzzcut the bad men at the lab had given her. Since her hair was long enough, Hopper had used the hair tie to pull her hair back in her first-ever ponytail.

El was so happy to finally have hair long enough to pin it back, even if it was a tiny, slightly sad excuse for a ponytail. It was one of the first steps she'd taken to becoming a regular kid, and thus she treasured the memory greatly. Keeping the hair-tie on her wrist not only reminded her that she was safe with Hopper, but that it was all thanks to him that she didn't have to live a life as a science experiment.

After all that Hopper has given her, the least of what he deserves is the truth.

"I think..." El begins slowly, fiddling with the hair-tie, "Mike saw me use my powers."

Hopper's eyes widen in concern. "He saw *what*?"

"It was an accident!" El explains quickly, "This other boy at school

was beating him up, and I...I stopped him. I saved Mike. And Mike was really hurt, and kind of out of it, but I think he still saw." She squeezes her eyes shut, preparing herself to get yelled at.

But Hopper doesn't yell. Instead, he just looks worried. Really worried. He sighs again, only this one is far heavier. "You were protecting him?" He asks.

El glances at him nervously and nods. "Yes."

Hopper falls silent, contemplating.

"I'm sorry!" El continues, "I didn't mean to! I mean, I did, but...I didn't want him to know."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing."

"Okay," Hopper nods, still thinking.

El eyes him.

"Okay," Hopper says again, more definitely. "I don't think that you should stop talking to him, kid. He sounded too worried — you're gonna have to tell him something."

"But you made me promise not to tell anyone!" El reminds him.

"I know I did, but that was then and...I trust your judgment, okay?" Hopper explains, looking directly at her, "You're not stupid, and you're old enough to know who you can and can't trust with your secrets."

El's surprised by his reaction and consequently isn't quite sure how to reply. She instead remains silent, trying her best to make sense of the entire situation.

Hopper glances at her alarm clock, then back to her. "Do you still wanna go to school today?"

El hesitates, but nods. Skipping class would only draw more attention

and suspicion. The last thing she wants right now is more questions to answer.

"I'll be okay," she assures Hopper. With a small smile, she leans across her bed, wraps her arms around Hopper's neck, and pulls him into a comforting hug. His beard scratches against her cheek and he still smells of coffee and cigarettes, but she doesn't let go, not until Hopper gently pries her off and reminds her that she's late enough as it is.

El reluctantly gets herself ready for school. Since she left her skateboard at school yesterday, Hopper agrees to drive her. By the time she arrives, it's well into 2nd period, but El isn't that upset. She shares her 1st period English class with Max and Dustin and she's not quite sure that she's ready to face them yet.

While El initially felt brave enough to agree to go to school, the moment she walks in through the front doors of Hawkins High, all of her confidence falls right to the sneaker-scuffed tiled floor. When she hears the muffled sounds of voices drifting from classrooms and the metallic slam of shutting locker doors, all she wants to do is flee.

*Relax, she mentally coaches herself, Just act normal.*

So she does. Well, she tries, at least. She forces herself to act normal in all of her classes. She pays attention, takes notes, and even speaks up to answer some of the teachers' questions.

But then lunchtime comes.

She knows that all of her friends are going to be at their usual table, most likely waiting for her. She almost manages to join them, but as she walks towards the cafeteria doors, her legs feel like lead — heavy, weighted down, keeping her stuck in place.

She doesn't know what to say to them. To *Mike*. They're going to have questions that El's not ready to answer. As much as she trusts her friends, she's just so scared of what they'll think that she can't bring herself to face them, not yet.

And so she runs. She finds a place to take refuge, a place where she

can hide until lunchtime is over, a place she hopes no one will think to look.

She should have known that Max would figure it out though.

El is seated on the bleachers, facing the empty football field, when Max finds her. The afternoon is chilly and the sky is gray, so both girls have their leather jackets zipped up. There's a steady wind that rustles the trees surrounding the football field. It whips Max's hair around, making it even messier than usual.

Their eyes meet, and even though El's surprised, she quickly falls back into her gloomy, shut-off demeanor. "Go away," she mumbles, averting her eyes downward.

"What the hell are you doing, El?" Max asks, but she doesn't sound mad. Concerned, if anything.

"Hiding."

"Why?"

El shrugs and keeps her gaze trained on her feet, as if there's suddenly something incredibly fascinating about the dirt patterns on her converse.

Max, undeterred, climbs the bleachers and comes to sit beside El. "I got you lunch," she offers, holding out a baloney sandwich. "It's Dustin's favorite — processed, slimy meat."

El flicks one of her own shoelaces.

"You know, I think there was a contest for which school in Indiana had the worst cafeteria food and Hawkins won," Max continues, still dangling the sandwich in front of El.

El finally meets Max's gaze. "Really?" She asks doubtfully.

"Okay, so, maybe not," Max admits, "But anyone would believe it. I mean, just *look* at this thing."

El eyes the sandwich with disdain, but as gross as it looks, she is

admittedly quite hungry. "Thanks," she mumbles, taking the sandwich from Max.

"No problem," Max shrugs, sitting back on the cold metal seat.

El bites into the sandwich, eating in silence as Max starts to look her over.

A minute passes, comprised of nothing but the sound of distant passing cars and rushing wind, and El isn't sure if she's supposed to be saying something.

Regardless, Max is the one to speak first. "Did you hear that Troy broke his arm?" She asks conversationally, "Apparently he was like walking through the woods and fell or something, I dunno, nobody really knows, he didn't show up for school today."

El continues to eat and only shrugs in reply.

"Wheeler looks pretty banged up too," Max continues, "He's got these dorky bandaids everywhere, a couple bruises too. He says he just got in a biking accident or some shit, but it seems a little suspicious. I mean, everyone knows that Troy hates Mike, and they just happen to get injured on the same night?"

El feels her eyes start to well up again.

"Did something happen, El?" Max asks, voice uncharacteristically soft. She can probably see that El's on the verge of tears, which is a little embarrassing.

El finishes her sandwich and is consequently left without an excuse to not talk. She pulls up her knees to her chest and rests her chin on them, trying her best not to shed tears in front of Max. "Mike got in a fight with Troy," she whispers, voice barely audible above the wind, "After school."

"Holy shit, really?" Max gasps, leaning closer to El.

El nods. Her eyes start to smart, but she blinks a few times, fighting the feeling away. "He...he saw me use my powers."

"He DID?!"

Another nod.

Max gapes at El, eyes wide. "What did he say?"

"Nothing," El mutters, "He passed out. I haven't seen him."

"So, what are you going to tell him?"

"I don't know," El admits weakly, hating how desperate she sounds. "I don't want him to know."

"Why not?"

"Because...he'll think I'm a freak. A weirdo."

Max eyes her skeptically. "So, you're just never going to tell him, then? What exactly is your plan?"

El eyes her back. "My plan?"

"Yeah. I mean, you want to date him, or marry him, or whatever."

"I don't want to *marry* him."

"You wrote 'Mrs. Eleanor Wheeler' all over your English notes last week."

El feels her cheeks flush red. "That was only that one time," she gripes defensively.

"Whatever," Max dismisses, "Either way, you can't keep lying to him for the rest of your life. You'll have to tell him eventually, so why haven't you?"

"Because," El hesitates, "Because...I'm not ready."

"Why not?"

*How can she explain this?*

"Do you know that feeling," El begins slowly, "When you're listening

to an album that you really like, and it's really good? It's really good and you don't want it to be over, so you just keep replaying the last songs over and over again. You're stuck, and you're not getting anywhere new, but...you're enjoying it, and you're happy." Her voice trails off as she frowns, unsatisfied with her own explanation. "That doesn't make sense."

"No, I get what you're saying," Max nods understandingly. "Kind of."

El nods and brings her arms around to hug her knees. "That's what it's like."

"You don't want to stop being happy," Max summarizes. "I get it, but I think that he deserves to know the truth."

"Why?" El asks feebly.

"Well, you love him, don't you?"

She thinks back to Mike, coming to sit beside her in that disgusting detention room. Mike, trying to make her laugh during their frog dissection. Mike, eagerly gushing about his Star Wars comics. Mike, protecting her at Jennifer's party. Mike, leaning in close to her as they talk by her locker. Mike, whispering into her ear, his fingertips brushing hers. Mike, walking through the forest, gaze locked on hers, eyes soft.

*Just...you.*

El nods in response to Max's question. "Yes."

"Then you have to tell him."

Mike, lying passed out of the forest floor. Mike, bloodied and bruised. Damp grass, dead leaves, metallic blood, iron, steel, tile, disinfectant.

Fear rises up within El like bile in her throat, and she shakes her head adamantly. "No," she insists, "I can't. I won't."

Max gives her a hardened, tired stare. "Fine," she says simply, "It's your choice."

El watches as Max proceeds to stand up and descend the bleachers.

"For the record," Max calls out as she walks away, "Mike wouldn't think that you're a freak. He'd probably be super into it, like his weird obsession with the Force."

"Really?" El doubtfully calls back.

Max turns to look over her shoulder at El. "Really. He hasn't stopped asking about you, like, all day. He cares about you, okay?"

El chews on her lower lip, nodding half-heartedly.

Max continues to walk away, but El doesn't follow her. She needs time to think, time to make a decision.

Unfortunately, by the time that the end-of-lunch bell rings, El still hasn't decided. She walks to Biology class with a heavy heart and a clouded mind.

Mrs. Hawthorne has dedicated this class period to working on their group projects, so when El enters, Mike is already seated at their regular lab table. When he sees El arrive, his eyes light up at once and he rises out of his seat.

"El!" He hisses excitedly, motioning for her to come over to their lab table.

El takes a deep breath and clenches her hands into small fists. She has to stay strong. She can't be the reason he gets hurt again.

She slowly makes her way over to their lab table in the back of the classroom, forcing her expression to remain indifferent. As she comes to a stop in front of Mike, he pulls her into his arms and embraces her in a tight hug, not caring that some of their classmates are now eyeing them curiously.

El remains stiff, not hugging him back, but not moving away either.

"You're okay!" Mike beams, pulling back to look at her face. "I was so worried!"

El examines his features more closely. His face looks better than when she'd last seen him, but only barely. Some of the tiny, minor cuts have begun the very early stages of healing, but other larger wounds, like the one on his temple and the bridge of his nose, are still covered in the band-aids she'd put there. His lips are tinged purple instead of soft pink, and she can see another bruise imprinted along his jawline.

Every injury just serves as a reminder of how badly El messed things up. She can't bring herself to look any further and averts her gaze.

"I'm fine," she says coldly, moving out of his grasp.

Mike's smile falters ever-so-slightly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," El deflects, moving to take her seat at the table. "Let's just get started."

Mike looks confused for a moment, but eventually nods. "Yeah, okay," he agrees, coming to sit beside her, "We can get started."

El takes out her notebook and sets it beside the Bunsen burner and set of glass test tubes that sit on every lab table. As she flips the page open to her notes from yesterday, she has to force herself to not make eye contact with Mike. Mike gets out their textbook and opens it to the genetics chapter, not-so-subtly throwing El questioning looks the entire time.

As the class gets to work on their projects, the classroom fills with the sound of amiable, excited chatter. Mike and El, in sharp contrast, are distinctly silent.

At least, they are until Mike decides to speak up.

"So, uh, about yesterday..." He begins carefully.

"Yesterday?" El echoes flatly, not looking up from her notebook.

"Yeah? Don't you think that we should like, talk about it?"

"Talk about what?"

Mike glances around the classroom. The rest of the students are at separate tables and distracted by their own projects. Mrs. Hawthorne is busy helping another pair of students who are seated across the room. After Mike takes note of this, he leans in closer to El and whispers, "About what happened to Troy?"

El feels her blood run cold. "He broke his arm," she says stiffly.

"He said *you* broke it," Mike points out, still whispering.

"He's lying," El shrugs, flipping to another page in her notebook.

"But I saw you!" Mike hisses, "You were holding your arm out at him, and your nose was bleeding, and—"

"Mike," El cuts him off brusquely, "Stop."

"Why?"

"We need to work on our project," El insists, pointing to her notes.

"Screw the project!" Mike scoffs, "This is more important!"

El has to stop herself from rolling her eyes. Why does he have to be so incredibly persistent?

She tries to ignore him by pulling out her Biology textbook and flipping to a random page, but Mike is undeterred.

"What are you hiding from me?" He asks, sounding frustrated.

El eyes him. "Hiding?"

"There's obviously something that you're not telling me," Mike elaborates, "I know what I saw, okay? Troy flew backward, just like that lamp flew at Jennifer's party. Both times you were there, and both times your nose started bleeding."

Even though his voice is hushed, El worries that the other students will be able to hear him somehow. She leans in closer to give Mike her best, most intimidating glare. "Mike. Stop."

"So you *are* hiding something?!" Mike exclaims in a hushed whisper.

El narrows her eyes in response. "...No."

"You are, I know it!" Mike hisses, "I can tell!"

"No!" El hisses back.

Though both Mike and El continue to speak in low whispers, their words hit each other with just as much tenacity as they would if they were shouting at one another.

"I thought that we were friends!" Mike snaps under his breath.

"We are!"

"No, we're obviously not, because friends don't lie to each other!"

"I haven't lied to you, Mike!"

"Keeping secrets counts as a lie!"

"No, it doesn't!"

"Yes, it does!"

"It doesn't."

"Whatever! You're still hiding something! Why won't you just be honest with me?"

"Because!"

"Because what?"

"Because you can't keep secrets, Mike," El says, not intending for it to sound so biting.

Mike frowns, looking hurt. "Yes, I can!"

"No," El shakes her head, "You can't. You told about not knowing The Clash, you told about Max going to the arcade—"

"Because that stuff barely even matters! I wouldn't tell about important stuff. Like, I didn't tell anyone that Max spray-painted Greg's car!"

El freezes. "Max did what?"

Mike pales. "Uh...nothing."

"That's what I mean!" El says bitterly, shaking her head, "I can't trust you, Mike."

"You said that you believed in me!" Mike reminds her.

"I know," El gripes.

"But now you say that you don't, so you lied. You *lied*. You're a liar."

For the millionth time today, El can feel her eyes start to sting. "I'm not," she mumbles, voice cracking a little, "I'm not a liar."

"Yes, you are!"

"I'm *not!*"

"Then tell me! Tell me what's going on with you!"

"No!"

"Tell me!"

"Mike, stop!"

"No!"

She hates him. She hates him because she loves him and because he's being so difficult and because he won't take 'no' for an answer and *why does he have to care so much?*

"I'm not going to stop until you tell me the truth!" Mike continues, "I'm not!"

"Mike—"

"Why won't you just be honest with me!?"

"—just stop!"

The argument ends with the sharp sound of shattering glass. El realizes that in her frustration, she accidentally used her powers to shatter the entire set of test tubes sitting on their table.

All of their fellow students turn when they hear the shattering sound, looking astounded.

Mike, once again, is the only one who saw what really happened. He stares slack-jawed at the glass shards that are scattered across the pages of her Biology textbook. "Y-you..." he stammers shakily, turning to look at El, eyes wide.

El blanches as she feels her heart stop.

"What is going on over here?!" Mrs. Hawthorne snaps, marching over to their table.

El quickly wipes away her budding nosebleed and sits up straighter. "The test tubes fell," she says quickly.

Mrs. Hawthorne eyes her skeptically. "The entire set of test tubes fell on their own?"

Mike and El exchange nervous glances.

"Breaking lab equipment is a serious offense," their teacher continues, "I need you two to be honest with me."

"I knocked it over!" Mike quickly answers. "I got mad!"

El grits her teeth. Mike's being Mike again, taking the blame for her mistakes, getting in trouble because of her, and she's not going to let that happen. "No, I knocked it over," she insists, "It was my fault."

"No. you didn't!" Mike snaps at El before turning back to their teacher, "No, she didn't! I did!"

"No!" El snaps back.

"Which one of you knocked over the test-tubes?" Mrs. Hawthorne asks warningly.

"I did!" Mike and El both insist.

Mrs. Hawthorne eyes them for a long moment before frowning resignedly. "Well, if neither of you are going to tell the truth, you're both going to be punished."

"That's bullshit!" El blurts without thinking.

There's an audible gasp from the rest of the students as Mrs. Hawthorne gapes at El.

"Detention, Eleanor!" Mrs. Hawthorne snaps, looking livid.

Mike glances at both of them before butting in with a quick, "But she's right, it's bullshit!"

El knows that he only said that to get detention too. She knows because when Mrs. Hawthorne snaps that Mike gets a detention too, instead of looking upset, he turns to El with a stupid little smirk like he's accomplished something.

El only glares at him in response.

---

They still have 20 minutes of detention left, but as usual, time passes so much slower within the walls of this classroom. It doesn't help that there's still an awkward, palpable tension simmering between Mike and El. They're sitting in desks right next to each other (Mike's doing, not hers), but El continues to ignore that he's even there. Mike keeps glancing anxiously at El, but El doesn't offer him any consolation. She wanted to try to nap the time away, but her desk is sticky, like someone spilled soda on it once and never bothered to clean it up.

This classroom is seriously disgusting.

"Hey, kids," Mr. Mortensen asks from the front desk, looking up from his newspaper, "What's an eight-letter word for 'The Clash, lead guitarist'?"

"Strummer," El offers dully.

"What's that?" Mortensen frowns.

"Joe Strummer," Mike pipes up, "He's the lead guitarist for The Clash."

El eyes him warily. Has he *still* been researching The Clash for her? The thought almost makes her heart soften. Almost.

*You're mad at him,* El reminds herself, *You're mad at him and you have to stay away and you CANNOT like him.*

"Oh," Mortensen shrugs, scribbling down the answer.

19 minutes left.

El slumps back in her seat, trying to think of some way to pass the time. During her last detention, time had gone by so much faster since she had Mike to talk to. As she reflects on this, she finds herself looking over to the window ledge, the spot where they'd sat on that fateful September afternoon.

Even though El knows that she's not supposed to like Mike anymore, she can't help but wonder what things would be like if Mike never came to sit beside her, if he never greeted her with that simple, nonchalant 'hey.' Would they still be in detention today? Would they have ever met again? Would they ever have spoken at all?

Probably not.

She can envision what would happen — it plays out in her mind like a movie. They're in the detention classroom, but Mike doesn't follow her to the window. Instead, he stays in his desk and when the time is up, they part ways. Time passes and her unrequited crush dwindles, eventually fading into a warm memory. They go through the rest of high school never knowing each other, and when they graduate, Mike goes off to a college far away and El stays in Hawkins. They both move on to other places, other people. One night, when El is lying in bed beside some faceless stranger, she finds herself missing Mike and what they could have been if things had played out differently. She spends the rest of her life hopelessly wondering, forever wishing she hadn't let him slip away.

As El pictures this, she realizes that this could still be their future if she continues to shut Mike out and lie to him. The realization makes her eyes water, and the reality of the situation hits her with so much force that she's unable to stop a few tears from leaking out and streaming down her cheeks.

Thankfully, the classroom door suddenly bursts open, startling El out of her somber reverie.

The school secretary ducks her head through the doorway, looking pretty frazzled. "Harold," she sighs, looking at Mr. Mortensen, "Your wife is calling."

"Again?" Mortensen asks flatly.

"Again," she nods.

"Alright, alright," Mortensen sighs and pulls himself out of his chair. He walks to the door, stopping only to give Mike and El a warning look. "Don't leave!"

"Wasn't planning on it," Mike mutters tiredly.

Mortensen shuts the door behind him, and then they're alone.

It's awkwardly quiet. Not that it wasn't before, or anything, but now without the faint grumbles of Mortensen attempting to solve his crossword, the only sounds to be heard are the slow ticking of the clock on the wall and the shuffle of their own feet.

El can feel her hands start to shake as she continuously envisions her and Mike's foredoomed future. She doesn't want it to end like that. She wants Mike to be a part of her life. As scared as she is, she has to tell him.

So, taking a shaky breath, El wipes her tears away and turns to look over at him.

"Mike."

"Yeah?" Mike asks hopefully, turning to look back at her. When he sees how red her eyes are, how frightened she looks, he pauses,

"Wait, is everything okay?"

El shakes her head. "No."

"What's going on?" Mike asks concernedly, sliding his desk closer to hers.

El swallows. "If...if I tell you my secret, you have to promise not to tell anyone else, ever," she instructs weakly.

"Of course!" Mike insists, "I'll never tell anyone, ever, I swear!"

El regards him cautiously.

"*I promise,*" Mike amends, looking directly into her eyes. He says it with so much sincerity and gravity, El knows that he means it from the bottom of his heart. She believes him.

"Okay," El nods. Her hands are still shaking, so she tightly clenches them shut.

*Where is she supposed to even begin?*

"My dad..." she starts slowly, carefully, "My dad isn't my real dad."

"So you're adopted?" Mike frowns.

"Kind of."

"Well, that's not a big deal!" Mike replies, giving her a small smile, "Lots of kids are adopted!"

"That's not it," El shakes her head, "He...he rescued me."

"Like, he kidnapped you?"

"No!" El frowns, "Just...just let me finish, okay?"

Mike clamps his mouth shut and nods.

El takes another breath before continuing. "I...I was born in Chicago, in this...lab. My mom was a part of this—"

*Government conspiracy. Experimental malpractice. Hundreds of arrests. Complete shutdown.*

El hesitates. "...Research. But it messed her up. They did too many tests, too many experiments, and it...it killed her."

Mike's eyes widen, but he keeps his mouth shut, allowing her to continue.

El's not quite sure how to gauge his reaction, but she keeps talking anyway. "Before she died, she had me, so I stayed at the lab. My dad worked there, he was a security guard. He knew about me, and he found out that they were going to do the same tests that killed my mom on me. He tried to get them to stop, but they didn't listen. They didn't care. So, he...he took me."

She can't bring herself to look at Mike, not if she wants to maintain enough courage to keep talking. She lowers her head and stares at the various pencil-scribbles that are etched all over her desk. "He took me and we came here. He got papers that said he'd adopted me, but I still had to stay in hiding. A few years later, the lab shut down, and all the people working there got arrested. That's when I got to start going to school."

El's clenching her hands so tightly, her fingernails are starting to leave cuts on her palms. But she doesn't stop. She has to tell him the truth, she can't afford to lose him. "I don't even have a real name, the lab just gave me an experiment number — eleven. My dad named me Eleanor."

She stops and hesitates, readying herself for the final, crushing reveal. "The reason the lab wanted to run tests on me was because... because..." Her voice cracks, wavers. "I was one of the experiments. I...I have powers. I can...move stuff with my mind...and control things...and...I'm...I'm a telekinetic, Mike."

Her voice completely breaks after she finishes, but deep down, it's a huge relief to have finally told him. Her secret feels like this burdening weight she's been forced to carry, a weight that's suddenly become unmoored.

*It's over.*

Tears are streaming down her face as she sniffles like a total dork, but she turns to smile at Mike hopefully.

He'll understand, he has to.

And yet—

Mike is still sitting beside her, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. He's looking at her in the way El feared he would if she told him — shock, horror, bewilderment. Like she's a freak. Like she's *crazy*.

*Oh no.*

El pales. "Mike?"

Mike just blinks at her and shakes his head, still looking shocked.

El crumbles. "Mike, say *something*."

Mike opens his mouth, closes it again, and gives his head another shake.

"Mike," El begs tearfully, "*Please*."

But for the first time since El's met him, Mike is completely and utterly speechless.

## 12. Breakfast at El's

On the list of all the screw-ups Mike's ever made, not responding to El's bombshell of a confession is definitely item number one.

In his defense, when he confronted El about hiding something from him, he definitely wasn't expecting her to tell him that she'd escaped from a lab and had superpowers. To be completely honest, he wasn't quite sure what he was expecting, but it definitely wasn't that. Maybe something more along the lines of Dustin's old cult theory.

Either way, once she told him, it all made sense. The levitating lamp, Troy's broken arm, the shattered test tubes, the way that she freaked out over investigating supernatural stuff — she was a telekinetic and Mike was a total idiot that somehow had been oblivious to this fact the entire time.

Unfortunately, by the time he fully comes to terms with everything, it's too late. El is already looking at him with such a wounded, teary-eyed stare, like Mike had just broken her heart. He probably had. But before Mike can even reply, Mortensen comes back, detention ends a few minutes later, and El dashes out of the detention room so fast Mike has to sprint to even keep pace with her.

"El, wait!" Mike pants, following her down the hallway, but she doesn't stop.

She hurries to her locker, dials the combination, and retrieves her skateboard within the blink of an eye. By the time Mike reaches her locker, she's already slammed it shut and hurried out the front doors.

Mike runs after her, but when he finally makes it out the front doors, El is skating out of the parking lot.

Earlier this morning, after explaining the "tragic bike accident" that he'd gotten into, Mike had tried asking his parents for a new bike, but to no avail. They claimed that a) he should be more careful next time, b) he was old enough to save up his own money to pay for it, and c) wasn't he going to be taking driver's ed next summer anyway? Why should they bother investing in a bike he'd only use for 8

months?

*Because now he has no chance of catching up to El.*

"*Shit.*" Mike groans. He turns to kick the brick wall of the school in frustration, but as he's still feeling sore from his fight with Troy, he only winds up stubbing his toe.

"*Shit!*" He groans again, clutching at his foot.

So, yeah, there's definitely no way that he's going after El. Not right now, anyway. Mike instead limps back home, frantically trying to figure out what to do next.

Should he wait until school on Monday? No, that would be too long. El is clearly upset, and there's no way that Mike's gonna leave her like that all weekend.

He should call her. It's probably not the best plan, considering that it failed to work last time, but it's better than nothing.

The minute Mike gets home, he rushes to the family phone and dials El's number.

As the phone begins to ring, Mike shuffles in place anxiously. "C'mon, El," he pleads, drumming his fingers on the handle of the receiver, "Please pick up."

No answer. The call goes straight to voicemail, so Mike tries leaving a message.

"Hey, El, this is Mike. If you get this message, please call me back. I need to talk to you, okay?"

Mike hangs up the phone, satisfied with his message...

...For about 3 seconds.

After he hangs up, he immediately starts second-guessing everything he just said. He *needed* to talk to her? Did that sound too demanding? What if she felt too pressured or freaked out by his voicemail, and it just made everything so much worse?

He leaves a second voicemail.

"Hi, El, this is Mike. Again. Look, I didn't mean that I needed to talk to you. We don't have to talk, if you don't want to, I just would, uh, really like to."

Mike cringes as he finishes his second voicemail. Somehow, his second attempt sounds even worse. It's way too whiny and lame for Mike's liking, so he tries for a third time.

Then for a fourth time...and a fifth...a sixth...and he starts to lose count after that.

El doesn't answer any of them, which may be a good thing, because the messages that Mike leaves don't improve, like, at all.

"So, anyway," Mike concludes, "I just really miss you, and I totally would have followed you home, but my bike is still broken."

Mike pauses, winces. *He would have followed her home?* He sounds like a complete stalker.

"Okay, well, I'm just gonna go now," Mike finishes quickly, "See ya' later, hopefully. I mean, if you want to see me, that is. I could see why you wouldn't want to, and like...okay, yeah, I'm hanging up now. Bye."

Mike groans as he sets the receiver down and slumps back against the wall.

He's such an idiot. Literally. If El had been reluctant to talk to him before, she's definitely not going to be persuaded by what had to be the weirdest voicemails that anyone had left in the history of forever.

Nevertheless, Mike hovers around the phone for the rest of the night. He does his homework and reads some comics in the living room, and every time he hears the phone ring, he rushes to answer it.

It's never her.

When the time comes for him to go to sleep, Mike trudges up to his room reluctantly. As he crawls into bed, his mind is a bustling flurry

of thoughts and worries. He can't stop thinking about El's confession, about how hard her life must be, about how much of an idiot he is for calling her a liar to her face.

It can't end like this between them, it just can't.

Mike closes his eyes tightly and achingly hopes that he'll get a second chance to make things right with her.

---

When Mike wakes up Saturday morning, he quickly hurries back to the phone to see if anyone (El) left any voicemails. Unfortunately, the only messages left on the machine are from annoying telemarketers and boring employees from his dad's work.

Mike is temporarily disheartened, but then he realizes that El easily could have called and not left a message. Maybe someone else had talked to her.

With that in mind, Mike next goes into the kitchen, where he's greeted by the smell of frying eggs and sizzling bacon.

His mother has a tradition of cooking breakfast for the family on weekend mornings, so when Mike enters, he finds her working by the stove. She's surrounded by miscellaneous bowls and cooking utensils, wearing an apron that's dusted with flour, and has her hair up in a messy up-do. When she turns to see Mike sliding into the kitchen, she gives him a warm, though slightly concerned smile.

"Michael?" She asks, "What are you doing up so early?"

"I dunno," Mike replies with a shrug, "I just woke up."

"You should go lie down until breakfast is ready," His mother says gently, "You need to let your wounds heal."

"No, I'm fine!" Mike scoffs, "I told you, I just fell off my bike!"

"You look more like you fell off a cliff, Michael," Mrs. Wheeler points out, only half-joking.

"Whatever!" Mike says with a huff. They're getting off topic here. "Did

I get any messages?"

"Messages?" Mrs. Wheeler repeats, sounding confused.

"Yeah? Like on the phone! Did anyone call asking about me?"

"Not that I know of," His mother replies, shaking her head. She glances up from the skillet of bacon she's frying to eye Mike curiously. "Why? Are you expecting someone?"

"No!" Mike answers quickly, "I mean...kinda."

His mom gives him a hopeful smile. "Does this have anything to do with El?"

Mike has honestly done his best to repress the embarrassing memory of his mom meeting El, so when he's reminded that Mrs. Wheeler is fully aware of who his crush is, it takes him by surprise.

"W-what?! No!" He stammers unconvincingly.

"Uh huh," Mrs. Wheeler simpers with a knowing look before turning her attention back to cooking. "You should invite her over again, Michael. She seemed really nice. She's really pretty too."

Mike wants to be annoyed, because really, his mom has to be the most embarrassing mom ever, but her words only remind him that the chances of El ever coming over again are currently slim to none.

He has to find a way to fix this, to make things right with El...and he thinks he knows exactly who can help.

After breakfast, Mike hurried back to the phone and uses the Yellow Pages to look up another number.

As he dials the number, Mike braces himself to be laughed at. Maybe even yelled at. Either way, he knows that he's probably going to get called out.

Her mom answers the phone. Mike asks to speak to her daughter, and minutes later, Max is yawning into the phone.

"Whaddya want, Wheeler?" She asks, sounding tired.

"I need help," Mike pleads.

"You can say that again," Max comments, proceeding to laugh at her own jab.

Mike allows her to finish laughing, his expressions stoic the entire time.

"Seriously, though," Max finally continues, "You cut off my Saturday-sleep-in time. Whatever you need, it better be important."

Mike hesitates. He's not sure what Max knows, so he has to tread carefully here. "El and I got in a fight," he weakly admits, "I...I really messed up."

"No shit," Max replies dryly. "I mean, she literally told you the biggest secret ever, and you just stared at her like a spaced-out weirdo."

*"She told you?!"*

"Duh! She's my best friend, of course she's gonna tell me when you act like a total idiot."

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" Mike sighs, "I didn't mean to make her feel bad, I was just surprised, is all. But now she won't answer any of my calls and I think she's mad at me."

"She's not mad," Max hesitates, "I would say she's more...completely devastated."

Mike frowns. "Wow. Great."

"What can I say?" Max continues, "You screwed up, Wheeler."

"I know, I know!" Mike replies frustratedly, "But I'm going to make things right. I have to make things up to her, I just don't know how."

Max gives an indifferent, yet somewhat curious, sort of hum. "What's your plan?" She asks coolly.

"I dunno," Mike admits, "I was thinking that maybe I could do something really nice for her. What kind of stuff would she like?"

"The Clash?" Max offers, "Movies?"

"Okay..." Mike frowns, not sure of how he could implement either of those into an apology.

"Oh!" Max pipes up, sounding more excited. "She loves Eggos!"

"Eggos?" Mike echoes.

"Yeah? Like the waffles? She loves them. I dunno why, but she always has."

Mike thinks back to the last time that they were at Benny's, when he and El had shared a waffle together. Even though they'd bickered at the library, when they sat side-by-side in that cozy diner booth, they'd been able to make amends.

Maybe, as cheesy as it may sound, sharing waffles again can help them reconcile this argument too.

God, he's such a wasteoid — a sappy, lovesick wasteoid.

Regardless, when he shares this plan with Max, she seems to approve.

"Oh yeah, she'll love that," Max concurs, "Just don't find a way to screw things up again."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Mike replies flatly.

"Anytime, dweeb."

Before they hang up, Max agrees to give El's address to Mike (though not without teasing him for being a total stalker).

After he ends the call, Mike hurries upstairs to shower and get dressed for the day. When he finishes, he digs through his sock drawer and pulls out the secret mason jar that he keeps all his money in.

He counts the money, all of which is leftover from his test-selling days, and comes to a grand total of \$10. As he stares at the crumpled wad of bills in his hands, he hesitates. He initially planned on using the money to start saving up for another bike, but...

He thinks back to El's tearful, heartbroken stare, and his decision is made for him.

He grabs his windbreaker, stuffs the money into his pockets, and leaves his house to begin the long walk to Bradley's Big Buy grocery store.

When Mike arrives, it doesn't take long for him to realize that he's made a gross underestimation. Knowing that El likes Eggos isn't nearly enough information, as, standing in the middle of the frozen food aisle, Mike learns that there are multiple different Eggos flavors.

So which one is her favorite? Homestyle? Cinnamon? Blueberry? Banana? Chocolate Chip?

Mike bites down on his lip as he weighs out all the options. If he picks one that she hates, then this entire plan will be for nothing.

*Better to be safe than sorry*, he finally decides, and proceeds to grab one box in every single flavor.

The cashier gives him a wary look when Mike comes to check out. Mike doesn't care enough to explain why a lone, bruised-looking kid is buying so many waffles for himself, so he instead just raises his eyebrow in response before handing over the cash.

In the end, he leaves the store with a plastic bag full of Eggos and a little over \$3 in his pocket. It's totally worth it.

As he follows Max's instructions on how to get to El's house, he tries rehearsing what he should say to her.

"Hi, El," Mike murmurs, talking to the sidewalk. "It's uh...a pretty good morning, huh?"

He pauses. It's not really a good morning for El, not when she'd supposedly spent the night feeling 'completely devastated.'

He tries again.

"Hey, El! It's...it's the morning! Have you had breakfast yet? Because I got you breakfast."

Now he sounds like her parent.

"Max told me you like Eggos," Mike tries again, "So, I just thought that you might like some, because...uh...you like them."

It would seem that even the universe itself had enough of Mike's cringe-worthy speeches, as after he finishes speaking, he accidentally trips over a large dip in the sidewalk and falls right onto his face.

Mike curses and groans, mostly because *ouch*, he was already still sore and that had *really* hurt, but also because during his fall, the plastic bag he'd been using to carry the waffles tore right across the bottom. The boxes of Eggos are now scattered around him on the sidewalk, and his wounds feel like they're throbbing again.

Great. Just great.

Despite this unfortunate turn of events, Mike doesn't allow himself to give up. He instead rises to his feet, brushes himself off, and bundles all the Eggo boxes into his arms. He has to walk a little slower to avoid dropping the waffles, but it's a manageable task.

About 20 minutes later, Mike arrives at a small, secluded family home located on the outskirts of town. It's a fairly average-looking house, but it's the only one nearby and it has a Hawkins police cruiser parked in the driveway, so Mike knows that this has to be El's place.

Unless Max purposely gave him the wrong address to mess with him. She wouldn't do that...would she?

Mike starts to feel anxious as he approaches the front door. It's kind of hard to reach the doorbell when he's holding the small mountain of Eggo boxes in his arms, but he manages to press the button using his elbow.

He hears the doorbell echo inside the house and holds his breath,

heart starting to pound. What if she doesn't want to talk to him? What if she spits in his face, or yells at him, or cries again, or—

His thoughts come to a screeching halt as the front door swings open. But, to Mike's surprise, it's not El who answers, but a man.

A really large, really tall, really intimidating-looking man.

"Can I help you?" The man asks gruffly.

Mike swallows. "H-hi. I'm — uh — looking for El?"

The man scans him over. "Who are you?"

"Mike? Mike Wheeler?"

The man's eyes widen in shock, though Mike's not quite sure why. "*Mike?*" He asks incredulously.

"Yeah?" Mike asks nervously.

"*You're* Mike?" He asks again, voice getting a little louder.

Mike isn't sure if he's supposed to be raising his voice too, but he does anyway. "Yeah?!" He repeats, also louder.

The man blinks at him for a moment before eyeing him. "The same Mike who left 20 voicemails on my answering machine last night?" He asks flatly.

Mike blushes. Had it really been that many?

"Yeah," Mike confesses sheepishly.

"The same Mike that had my daughter crying for most of last night?" The man asks challengingly.

Mike lowers his head. "Yeah," he mumbles.

The man doesn't say anything more. Instead, he continues to give Mike a hardened glare.

Mike, fearing that he's about to get kicked out, quickly speaks up to

defend himself. "I'm really, really sorry I hurt her feelings!" He earnestly pleads, "I made a mistake and I need to tell her that. I just wanted to come over and apologize in person!"

The man eyes him skeptically again. "What's with all the waffles?"

"The waffles?" Mike blushingly echoes, glancing down at the big stack of boxes, "I, uh, got these for El. Max told me that she really likes them."

"You talked to Max?"

"Yeah. We're friends. Kind of."

The man scans him over again, quietly contemplating for a moment, before he gives a reluctant sigh. "Alright, kid, come on in."

Mike smiles. "Really?"

"Uh-huh."

"Thanks!" Mike beams, stepping through the doorway. He stops in the foyer, looking around the house curiously. Similarly to his home, directly in front of him lies the stairs to the upper floor. To his left, he can see the living room. To his right, there's a slightly messy kitchen. On the kitchen table sits a bunch of manila folders and an ashtray, the latter of which has a still-glowing cigarette butt resting inside.

"Is El home?" Mike asks, glancing at the man, who he's just going to assume is El's dad.

"Yeah," El's dad nods, glancing towards the stairs, "I think she's still asleep. I mean, she hasn't really left her room."

Mike frowns as he feels another tinge of guilt jab at him. "Oh," he mumbles.

"I'm sure she'll be happy to see you, though," Her dad continues. He pauses, then nods his head towards Mike. "I'm her dad, by the way. Jim Hopper."

"You're the chief of police, right?" Mike asks nervously.

"Uh huh," Hopper nods, giving him a knowing look. "So, no funny business, alright?"

Mike's cheeks flush pink. "I wasn't planning on any," he insists, flustered.

"Good answer," Hopper smiles. He opens his mouth to add something, but is abruptly cut off by a small, sleepy voice.

"Dad?" The voice calls out, coming from the top of the stairs. "What's going on? I heard shouting."

Mike and Hopper both turn to see El coming down the staircase, wiping at her eyes tiredly. She comes to a stop on the last step, finally lowering her hands to look at the scene before her.

And Mike's jaw drops.

She's wearing a baggy yellow Benny's Burgers T-shirt and gray sweatpants as pajamas, but it's not her outfit that shocks Mike.

It's her *hair*.

For the first time since Mike's ever known her, it's not slicked back. Instead, it curls and spirals in a fluffy mop. It's mussed from sleep, causing several flyways and ringlets to stick out in odd directions. It's even curlier than Dustin's, which Mike never knew was possible.

She's also notably not wearing any eyeshadow, but nevertheless, when El turns to look at Mike, her wide-eyed gaze looks just as large and piercing.

"Mike?!" El squeaks, looking terrified.

"El?" Mike gapes, looking stunned.

"Mike," Hopper smirks, turning to look at El triumphantly.

---

Mike and El are seated side-by-side on the living room couch. Mike

has removed his windbreaker, but he still has the pile of Eggo boxes resting on his lap, and El is hugging her knees, looking extremely nervous. Her face is a vibrantly bright pink, and she seems almost scared to look at Mike.

Hopper is seated directly across from them in an armchair he pulled up. He's smoking another cigarette, examining both Mike and El closely.

Mike can't help but feel like he's about to be interrogated, which forces him to keep his gaze locked on Hopper, even though he really, really wants to look at El.

Hopper removes the cigarette from his mouth and uses it to point towards Mike. "So, Mike."

"Yeah?" Mike inquires anxiously.

"You're the kid who's dating my daughter," Hopper says definitively.

*Dating?!* Mike nearly chokes as he blushes bright red.

"We're not dating!" He exclaims at the same time that El does.

Mike and El blush harder and exchange embarrassed glances. Even though El follows this up by looking away again, Mike can't help but stare a little longer. Her hair is just...crazy. It's so big and so curly and just...

*Beautiful.*

"Then what are you?" Hopper counters, raising an eyebrow.

Mike quickly snaps his attention back to Hopper. "We're, uh...we're friends."

"Huh," Hopper grunts, "Okay then. What do you do, Mike?"

Mike swallows. "I'm president of the A.V. Club?" He replies, and winces. Why did he have to say it like it was a question? He's so nervous and sounds so much like a liar, Hopper's probably going to like, arrest him, or something.

"What's that?" Hopper asks, brow furrowed.

"The Audiovisual Club? We're in charge of like, fixing technology, and dealing with film equipment, and making videos for the school."

"What kind of videos?"

"Whatever the school wants," Mike shrugs. He can feel his nervousness slowly fading the more he talks about the familiar subject, "Right now we're working on a video homage for the Homecoming football game next weekend."

"I see," Hopper nods slowly. He slips his cigarette back into his mouth and takes another smoke before continuing. "So, you two going to Homecoming?" He asks, glancing between the two of them.

"Dad!" El squeaks, eyes wide.

"What?" Hopper asks. He sounds nonchalant, but Mike can detect the teasing edge to his voice.

El gives him a pointed, annoyed glare before motioning to Mike. "You're being embarrassing!" El whispers, cheeks crimson.

"It's fine!" Mike assures her, giving El a small smile.

El looks only more flustered by this and quickly turns to back to her dad, who looks bemused by the entire situation.

"See? I'm fine," Hopper shrugs to El.

El gives him a flat stare.

"So, kid," Hopper takes another drag of his cigarette before continuing his conversation (interrogation) with Mike. "El tells me you got in a fight?"

"Uh, yeah," Mike reluctantly admits.

"Why?"

Mike hesitates. He turns to glance at El, unsure of how much he

should reveal to her Dad, but El is now staring determinedly at her socks.

"There's this guy at our school..." Mike slowly begins, "Troy. He's a huge jerk, like he's always picking on literally everybody. And he said some bad stuff about El on Wednesday, so I...I threw a dodgeball at him, and so he got mad, so he, uh, kinda beat me up on Thursday."

"And that's when you saw El," Hopper carefully says.

"Yeah," Mike nods, "She...uh...used her powers to stop him."

El remains silent and hugs her knees closer to her chest, looking increasingly nervous.

"So, she told you," Hopper summarizes, glancing at El.

Mike nods.

"Is that why you guys fought?"

Mike and El glance at each other, each looking rather remorseful. "Kind of, yeah," Mike mumbles ashamedly.

There's an awkward silence comprised of El shifting in place, Mike drumming on the side of his Eggo boxes, and Hopper regarding them both with an unreadable, slightly analytical expression on his face.

"But that's why I'm here," Mike continues, glancing at Hopper, and then at El.

El pauses and finally holds Mike's gaze, looking intrigued.

"I wanna say that I'm sorry," Mike states sincerely, not looking away from El. "I'm really, really sorry, and I want to make things up."

"With Eggos?" Hopper asks, sounding amused.

"With Eggos," Mike repeats, starting to realize how lame his waffle-plan sounds.

There's a small smile tugging at the corner of El's lips, but she

remains blank-faced for the most part. "Why did you bring so many?" She asks.

It's the first question she's directed towards Mike since he arrived, and it takes Mike by surprise.

"I, uh," he stammers shyly, "I didn't know what kind you liked, so I just got...all of them."

For a brief second, Mike could swear that he hears El giggle, but she masks it with a small cough. "Oh," she says nonchalantly, looking away from him again.

"Anyway," Hopper continues, cigarette still balanced between his lips, "You know that you gotta keep quiet about El's powers, right, kid?"

"Of course!" Mike nods earnestly.

"Cause we wouldn't want her to be put in danger."

"Never!"

El glances back and forth between both guys, looking a little anxious. "Dad?"

Hopper turns to her. "Yeah?"

"Can I talk to Mike?"

"Of course you can talk to him."

"Alone?"

Hopper eyes El, and then Mike, but Mike only smiles awkwardly in response.

"I guess so," Hopper yields.

"C'mon," El says to Mike quickly, already grabbing him by the arm.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hopper asks, affronted by her attempted hasty departure.

"Upstairs?" El answers, as if it was obvious.

"To your room?" Hopper asks, looking suspicious.

El nods.

Mike can see that Hopper is wrestling with how to respond. He inhales another whiff of his cigarette and breathes out, causing smoke to plume from his nose.

"Fine," Hopper reluctantly says after a beat of silence. "I'll just...uh... stay down here then." His gaze flits down to the Eggo boxes in Mike's arms and he proceeds to grab them out of Mike's grasp. "I don't think you've had breakfast yet, so I'll get these started for ya!."

"Thank you!" El says in relief. She gives Mike another tug on his arm and starts pulling him along, leading him out of the living room, back into the foyer, and up the stairs.

"Hey, kid?" Hopper calls out at their retreating backs.

El and Mike pause at the middle of the staircase. "Yes?" El calls back, slightly impatient.

"Do me a favor and keep your door open, okay?"

Mike watches as El gives an aggravated sigh under her breath. "Okay," she gripes.

She turns to shake her head at Mike, giving him a look that screams, *can you believe my dad?*, but Mike only smiles nervously in response. He's still reeling over the fact that he's about to go to El's bedroom to be alone with her, and even though he knows that they're probably just gonna talk, he feels like his mind is about to short-circuit.

El leads him the rest of the way up the stairs, down the hallway, and into her bedroom. As she pulls him inside, Mike casually examines her room.

The walls are pink, which Mike honestly wouldn't expect from El, but then again, it's not like he's not learning that there's a lot of unexpected things about El. The walls are covered in posters of

various bands and polaroids of her and Max. There's a dresser against the wall with a small TV on it, alongside various bottles of nail polish.

Heeding her dad's instructions, El leaves the bedroom door ajar. She lets go of Mike's arm and moves to sit on the full-sized bed that's adorned with a big, soft quilt and several pillows.

"I'm sorry about that," She apologizes as she takes a seat.

Mike, still blushing like crazy, hesitantly moves to sit beside her, making sure there's plenty of space between them. Her legs hang off the bed as his remain planted on her plush carpeted floor. "About what?" He asks.

"My dad," El huffs, "All the questions. And—" she pauses and motions to herself, "Me."

"What's wrong with you?" Mike frowns.

El bites down on her lip and looks away, embarrassed. "My hair?" She mumbles. "And I'm not dressed."

"So? You look great!" Mike assures her.

El eyes him.

"I'm serious!" Mike insists, "When I saw you come downstairs, the only reason I looked so surprised was just because it's so...different. But different isn't bad!"

El relaxes a bit, but still looks a little awkward.

"...Why do you keep it slicked back all the time?" Mike asks cautiously.

"Because," El sighs, "I feel like I look like a dweeb."

"You don't," Mike pauses, blushes. "You look really pretty."

El's eyes widen as she gives him a startled, yet flattered, smile.

"So, uh," Mike continues quickly, moving the conversation along before they can dwell too long on the 'pretty' part, "Why did you bring me up here?"

"Right," El replies, sitting up straighter. "I wanted to talk to you, alone. I think...I think we should talk about everything that happened."

Mike feels himself breathe a sigh of relief. She's willing to talk to him. After how dumb he'd acted around her, it's way more than he feels he deserves.

"Listen," Mike hurries to say, not wanting to waste any time mincing words, "I'm sorry I didn't say anything when you told me about your powers. I was just so surprised, I didn't know what to say. It was just...not what I was expecting, and I should have said something."

He pauses, before quickly adding, "Also, I'm so, so sorry I called you a liar. You're not a liar, I was just being too pushy and annoying and—"

"Mike," El cuts him off, "It's okay. I shouldn't have ignored you."

Mike doesn't know if he should ask the question plaguing his mind, but he does anyway. "Why did you?"

El falls silent as she thinks of what to say. "I thought that I would hurt you," she finally answers.

"Hurt me?"

El nods. "That you'd get hurt *because of* me, like with Troy."

"That wasn't your fault though," Mike points out, "I made my own decision, and it's not like Troy didn't deserve it. Also, our fight wasn't even that bad."

El gives him a flat stare that's so indignant, Mike doesn't have to ask to know that she doesn't believe him.

"It's true!" Mike nevertheless insists, "...Mostly."

"Hardly," El mutters.

"Besides," Mike continues, tilting up his chin and pointing to his bruised jawline, "Now we match." He leans in to point at the faint scrape on El's chin, the one she'd gotten the first time she tried skateboarding.

El blinks at him in confusion, and it suddenly occurs to Mike that perhaps that wasn't the most tactful of jokes.

But then El glances down at her bruised chin, and then Mike's, and then she snorts. She snorts, and her snorts turn into giggles, and her giggles collapse into laughter.

Mike doesn't think that the joke was that funny, but it dawns on him that perhaps it was just the tension-relieving jab that El needed.

"We match!" She smiles, looking visibly more comfortable after her laughs die down.

"We do," Mike grins at her and shrugs, unsure of what to say next.

They both fall silent for a minute as El begins to carefully study his face. As her eyes scan his features, Mike desperately wishes he could read her thoughts.

As if sensing his inner wish, El raises a tentative offer, "Do you want to ask me anything?"

"What?" Mike asks.

"About my powers?"

"Oh, right!" Mike replies, "I mean...yeah! Of course, I do! There's just so much, I don't even know where to start!"

"Well, what do you want to know?" El asks.

"I dunno!" Mike exclaims with a light laugh, "I mean, everything! Or, I guess, whatever you feel comfortable telling me. I just...I want to know everything about you. I don't want us to keep secrets from each other."

El smiles gratefully, then pauses. "Well...you can ask me anything. I

don't remember a lot, mostly just what my dad has told me."

"Okay..." Mike takes a bit to come up with his first question, but even though El's given him permission to ask, he still treads forward cautiously. "...Do you know who your other dad is? Like, your biological one?"

El shakes her head. "I think my mom started doing the experiments after she got pregnant with me."

"Oh, okay...so, that story about your dad, Hopper, I mean, having you then getting divorced, that's not true?"

"It's not," El admits, "He just told that so it wouldn't be so weird when he came back to Hawkins with a kid."

"That makes sense."

"Yeah."

"So, what can you do, exactly?"

"Just what I told you," El replies, idly playing with a stray thread on her bed's quilt, "I can move things, break things."

"Can you like, read minds?"

"No, but sometimes I can see people."

Mike crinkles his brow. "See people?"

"It's hard to explain," El pouts, "Sometimes, in my mind, I can go to this place. It's like...a void, and I can see what someone is saying or doing."

Mike's eyes widen. "Holy shit!" He murmurs, impressed, "That's really cool!"

"I guess so."

"So...what do the nosebleeds mean? Does that have anything to do with the Void?"

"No," El shrugs, "They just happen when I use my powers, or when I get really upset."

"Does it hurt to use your powers?"

"No, but sometimes I get really tired after."

"Is that why you passed out at the party?"

El nods.

Mike finds himself shuddering a little as he thinks back to that night. Seeing El sprawled lifeless across the floor is still one of the most terrifying moments he's ever experienced. He'd just felt so defenseless and confused, like there was nothing he could do to help El.

Maybe, if he'd known about her powers, he would have been able to better help her, somehow. The realization is a little frustrating, though Mike isn't quite sure if he's more upset with El or himself.

"You could have told me," Mike pauses, "I know you said that I can't keep secrets, but I would never tell anyone about this. I mean, it's like your Dad said, it could put you in danger!"

"It could," El admits, starting to look worried again.

"They're not still after you, are they?" Mike asks concernedly, "The people at the lab?"

"No," El answers definitively, but she still seems increasingly anxious, "When the lab shut down, they were all arrested. But it's still not completely safe. It never will be."

Mike can see her hands clench tightly, a sign he knows means that she's getting anxious.

"I still see them," she mumbles, "I have nightmares, and sometimes they feel real. Like...like I'm trapped again, and—"

Her voice cracks and wavers off, and that's all it takes for Mike to quickly pull her into his arms for a tight hug. "Hey!" He says soothingly, "It's okay! They can't hurt you anymore, okay?"

El nods into his chest, breathing out shakily. She gingerly returns his hug, burrowing herself into his embrace.

Mike holds her as she calms herself, rocking her side-to-side ever-so-slightly. As she relaxes against him, Mike keeps one hand rested against her back and moves the other to rest in her impossibly curly hair, and even though this really isn't the right time, *holy shit it's so soft and wow, was he weird for noticing?*

"I'm sorry I freaked out," El eventually mumbles into his chest, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was just scared."

"Of the lab?"

"Yes, but you too. I thought...I thought you would think I was a freak."

"I would never think that!" Mike declares adamantly, "You're...you're amazing."

"I am?"

"You are!" Mike nods, absentmindedly twisting one of her curls around his finger, "You're like, really smart, like you always do a good job whenever we work on our homework and biology assignments and stuff. And you're really caring. You protected me from Troy, and from the fight at Jennifer's party, and even when you were uncomfortable about helping me investigate stuff, you still never called me crazy or a liar or anything. You're just really the coolest person I know."

El shifts in his arms, and Mike can sense her smiling. "Oh," she says simply.

"And," Mike continues, "Your powers are awesome. You're like a Jedi! Or a Mage!"

"A Mage?" El questions curiously.

"Yeah, a Mage. It's a character class in Dungeons and Dragons. Mages are like wizards, they can cast all kinds of spells and do magic and stuff, except they don't need a spell book. They can just cast spells

with words or gestures or whatever. They're super cool."

El pulls out of his embrace to meet his gaze. "You think I'm like that?" She asks hopefully.

Mike frowns, not quite sure what she's asking. "Like what?"

"Like...the coolest person you know?"

Mike feels his heart skip a beat as he meets her gaze and nods.

El smiles excitedly before leaning back in to hug him once more. "You're the coolest person I know, too," she mumbles, talking into his chest again.

The way she's talking into him is somewhat reminiscent of her behavior at Jennifer's party, only this time is way better, mainly because El's not drugged, obviously, but also because there's no second-guessing whether or not El means what she's saying.

"I'm not cool," Mike jokingly mumbles back, resting his chin atop her head.

"Yes, you are," El insists. As she talks, her fingers trace lackadaisical patterns on his back, leaving goosebumps behind, "You're really funny, and you make me laugh all the time. And you're even smarter, and you protect me, and...I feel safe with you."

Mike finds himself holding his breath, as if he dares to move, this tender moment they're sharing will somehow fracture. "Really?" He asks, voice a hushed murmur.

"Yes," El whispers.

Mike smiles and cuddles her closer. In that moment, with El bundled in his arms, Mike vows to himself that he'll never stop keeping her safe. Even though she's more than capable of fighting her own battles, Mike wants her to always know that he'll be there to watch her back, or help her when she stumbles.

He's just about to tell her so, but then he's suddenly cut off by the sound of someone clearing their throat.

Both Mike and El jolt out of each other's arms, startled to see that Hopper is now standing in the doorway to El's bedroom.

"Dad!" El gasps. "Hi!"

"Hey," Hopper greets casually, "The Eggos are done."

"The Eggos?" El echoes, looking puzzled.

"The ones that Mike brought?"

"Right!" El blushes. "I forgot."

Hopper raises an eyebrow as he glances at Mike and El. "Did I interrupt something?"

Mike, still well aware of the fact that her dad is a cop, feels his heart stop. "No!" He replies quickly, sliding a few inches away for emphasis. "We were just talking!"

"I see," Hopper says, sounding quite skeptical.

"We'll be down in a minute!" El tells her dad, giving him a reassuring smile.

"Humph," Hopper snorts, turning to go back into the hallway, "Well, you better hurry, otherwise they're gonna get cold, and I'll probably eat them all."

Mike and El both snort and exchange wry smiles.

As soon as El's dad heads back downstairs, it dawns on Mike that they have another issue to deal with: how El is going to handle her powers around Will, Lucas, and Dustin.

Mike turns to look at El again, trying to keep his demeanor as non-pressuring as possible. "Are you going to tell the rest of our friends?"

El pauses, as if the idea had only just dawned on her. "I didn't think of them," she admits, "I...I'm not sure."

"Well, I think you should," Mike gently suggests, "I know they'll

support you."

El eyes him. "Really?"

"Yeah!" Mike nods, "And besides, then you'll be able to be more comfortable around them! And like, if we ever get stuck in a situation where something goes wrong again, like at Jennifer's party, we'll all be there to help you."

"You're right," El admits, nodding, "But..."

Mike frowns. "But?"

"I'm still a little scared," El murmurs, giving him an apologetic frown.

Mike gives her a soft smile in return. Though he can feel his heart fluttering nervously in his chest, he carefully reaches out and grasps her hand. "Don't worry," he assures her, "I can help you tell them. You won't have to do this alone."

El glances down at their hands, then back up at him. "Promise?" She whispers.

Mike smiles. "I promise."

El gives him a hopeful, tender smile. She carefully moves their hands so that their fingers are tightly intertwined, and, as she leans in to rest her head on his shoulder, Mike can't help but revel in how perfectly they fit.

## 13. Into the Woods

El is crowded with her friends in the A.V. Club room when Will brings up the idea.

"Are you guys busy this weekend?" He begins, glancing at everyone curiously.

Mike is crouched in front of the TV, trying to get it to turn on. Dustin is hovering beside him, snacking on a 3 Musketeers bar, and trying his best to instruct Mike on what to do, even though Mike claims he already knows what to do. Max and Lucas are seated in two of the desks, with Max's legs draped across Lucas' lap.

It's Monday after school, and they're all in here to see the boys' final cut of their Homecoming video. El is seated on top of the third desk, near the back of the group. She finds herself torn between eyeing Mike (because he looks really cute whenever he's focused), or eyeing Max and Lucas (because she can't help but wonder: are they dating now? It's kinda unclear. El's pretty sure that Max would tell her if they were, so they're probably not, but first it was holding hands during movie night, and now Max is totally acting even weirder than usual around him).

Despite all the clamor, when Will poses his question, everyone stops what they're doing to turn and look at him.

"I dunno," Dustin shrugs, "I mean, whatever we do, we're probably going to be together anyway."

"Why?" El asks Will, intrigued.

Will, seated in the fourth desk, hesitates before continuing. "Well, I was just wondering if you guys wanted to go camping?"

"Camping?" Lucas frowns, confused.

"That's kinda random, Byers," Max nods, eyeing him.

"I know," Will blushingly admits, "It's just...I don't know, it's kinda dumb."

"No, what is it?" Mike asks concernedly, "You can tell us."

Will gives Mike a grateful smile before turning to look back at the rest of the group. "Well," he begins, "Jonathan and I kind of have this tradition. On the last weekend of October, we take a camping trip to the woods, you know the big forest out by the Quarry? And we like, set up sleeping bags and build a campfire and roast marshmallows and...I dunno, it's just always a lot of fun."

"And you want us to do that with you?" Mike offers.

Will nods.

"Let me get this straight," Max cuts in, removing her legs from Lucas' lap and sitting up straighter, "You want us, a group of teenagers, to go spend a night in the forest, *alone*?"

"Yes?" Will hesitates.

"You realize that that's like, the set-up for every slasher movie ever?" Max points out, "Friday the 13th? Madman? Sleepaway Camp? You're basically asking to get murdered."

"Those are just movies," El frowns.

"I dunno, Max has a point," Dustin shrugs, "It sounds kinda risky; we'd basically be tempting the horror fates."

"I know," Will patiently replies, "But...I mean, we've been doing it every October since our dad left, and this is the first year that Jonathan's not going to be here since he's at NYU now."

Everyone falls silent at that, looking a little guilty.

"I dunno, it was a dumb idea," Will hastily continues, slumping back in his desk, "Just forget I said anything."

"No!" Mike frowns, "Let's do it!"

"Really?" Will asks hopefully.

"Yeah," Max nods, looking a little embarrassed, "It could be fun, I

guess. And if a serial killer does come after us, we could always use Dustin as bait."

"Why me!?" Dustin protests, looking offended.

"My dad has a lot of old camping stuff," El offers, ignoring Dustin and Max's bickering, "If we need anything."

"Okay!" Will replies, starting to look more excited. "I mean, if you guys really want to."

"We really do," Mike assures Will before turning back to fiddle with the TV.

"But wait," Lucas suddenly pipes up, looking concerned, "Isn't the homecoming dance this weekend?"

"No, that's the football game, you dweeb," Max huffs with an eye roll, "The game is this weekend, the dance is next weekend."

"Why do you know that?" Dustin snorts.

"Why don't you?" Max snaps back defensively, "You're the ones who made a whole video for it!"

"But do we care about going to the football game?" Will points out, looking puzzled.

"No," Dustin snorts again.

"Speaking of," Mike segues, "I finally got the TV to turn on, so we can watch our video."

"Finally," Max sighs, "Let's see this thing."

"Full disclaimer," Dustin prefaces, "It's kinda super boring, because it's about football, but in our defense, we did the best we could."

"It's not boring," Lucas counters, "I mean...it kind of is, but it could be worse."

"I think it's fine!" Mike insists, "Let's just watch it and see."

"Have you guys not watched it or something?" Max asks skeptically.

"This is our first time watching the final cut," Will explains, "We just finished it today."

"It'll be good," El assures them, "I know it. You guys are all really talented."

Mike glances over his shoulder to smile at El thankfully, and El feels her heart flutter in response. It's not fair how he manages to look insanely cute even when his face is still a little bruised and he's wearing the most basic of hoodies.

El watches Mike as he inserts the tape into the VHS player under the TV, hurries to the back of the room, and turns off the lights. As the tape clicks into place and begins to whirr inside the player, Mike comes to sit beside El on the top of the desk.

This, of course, causes El to blush like mad. It's a pretty small desktop as is, so having Mike squeeze in beside her means that they're seated rather close to each other. It's not like she minds this, or anything, but she's still adjusting to being this up close and personal with Mike on a regular basis.

Ever since they spent Saturday afternoon eating waffles and watching cheesy soap operas at her house, things have felt a little different. El's not quite sure what it is, but something has definitely changed. They're more comfortable around each other (for the most part), and El notices that Mike's been casually gazing at her more often, like before school, during lunch, during Biology, right now...

"Aren't you supposed to be watching the video?" El whispers, giving him a teasing smile.

Mike flinches and nods, looking flustered. "Uh, yeah," he admits, turning to look back at the TV.

El has to bite down on her lower lip to stop herself from giggling. As she turns to look toward the screen, she does her best to pay attention to the video, and not the fact that Mike currently smells like Ivory soap (a fact that, while albeit slightly strange to point out, is

nevertheless pretty distracting).

El doesn't know too much about sports, but from what she can tell, the video is constructed well. There's plenty of footage from the games, the transitions are nice, and she can tell that the boys must have worked really hard on it.

When the video ends, Mike leaves El's side, turns on the lights, and goes to retrieve the tape from the VHS player. "And that's pretty much it," he summarizes, glancing at all the members of the group as he stands before them.

"So, what do you think?" Dustin asks, turning to look at Max and El, "Did that not just like, blow your mind?"

"Oh, it did," Max nods, "But not in the way you probably wanted."

"What do you mean?" Lucas frowns.

"Isn't this supposed to be a video supporting our school?" Max asks incredulously.

"Obviously," Dustin scoffs.

"Then why did you dweebs put in so many shots of the other teams scoring on us?"

The boys pale and turn to look at each other worriedly.

"We did!?" Mike exclaims, looking panicked.

"But the crowd was cheering!" Will pouts, "Doesn't that mean we scored?"

"That means that the other team's crowd was cheering," Max replies, "Not ours."

The guys exchange collective groans of defeat.

"It's a small mistake!" El offers encouragingly, "I didn't notice!"

"Still," Mike sighs, "We're gonna have to fix it."

"But Mr. Coleman wants it turned in by Wednesday!" Lucas laments.  
"That gives us less than two days!"

"I'll help you geeks fix it," Max huffs.

Dustin eyes her. "You know about video editing?"

"No," Max admits, "But I know how to tell the difference between winning or losing, which you guys obviously don't."

The guys nod reluctantly, all unwilling to argue with that.

"Let's meet after school and work on it tomorrow," Mike instructs, "It's already getting late. We'll work on it tomorrow, finish it up on Wednesday, and then we can start planning for the camping trip."

Everyone else nods in agreement before rising out of their seats.

"I can't believe I'm gonna have to help you nerds," Max gripes as she grabs her backpack and skateboard.

"If you're helping them make the video," El nonchalantly responds,  
"Does that mean you're in the A.V. Club now?"

Max pauses to crinkle her nose in disdain. "Please, no," she groans.

"Too late!" Lucas smirks, giving her a light nudge, "You're one of us now, Mad Max."

Dustin bursts out laughing at this, which only causes Max to look more annoyed (though, to be fair, El is certain that Max's annoyance falls under the "pretending like she hates something even though she secretly likes it" category).

Max exits the classroom while bickering with Lucas and Dustin on whether or not she's a nerd like them (according to Dustin, since she has the highest scores at the arcade and she's seen 2/3 Star Wars movies she is; according to Max, Dustin can shut up).

Will grabs his backpack and moves to follow them, but first stops to look at Mike and El.

"Thanks for agreeing to go on the camping trip with me," he says, smiling shyly, "I know it sounds dumb, but...it really means a lot."

"It's not dumb," El assures him.

"El's right!" Mike nods, "If it's something important to you, then it's important to all of us."

"Still," Will insists, "I just wanted to say 'thanks'."

El and Mike both give Will reassuring smiles before he continues to head out the door.

"See you tomorrow!" Will cheerily calls back over his shoulder.

"Bye, Will!" Mike calls back.

And just like that, they're alone.

There's an awkward beat of silence as Mike and El exchange nervous smiles. Even though they've been more comfortable with each other since Saturday, this current newfound privacy came quickly and by surprise.

Thankfully, Mike, as usual, has something to talk about.

"Did you see that Troy was back in school today?" He asks. He moves closer, sits on top of the desk that Max was previously seated in, and positions himself so that he's facing El.

"Yes," El nods, "We have Biology with him."

"Right!" Mike blushes, looking embarrassed.

It was true, Troy had returned to school that day. He was sporting an arm cast and a surly glare, but other than that, he'd kept to himself. El caught him looking her way during Biology class, but all it'd taken was one cold glare from her to get him to snap back in the other direction.

"I don't think he's going to bother us," El remarks.

"Yeah, all thanks to you!" Mike beams.

"And you," El reminds him.

"I guess," Mike shrugs, "But it was mostly you."

El doesn't feel like turning this into a debate (mostly because she knows that Mike would never give it up), so she chooses to give him a soft smile instead.

"Speaking of all that," Mike continues, "I kind of have an idea."

"An idea?" El frowns.

Even though they're completely alone, Mike still glances around the A.V. Club room before leaning in a little closer. "I think the camping trip might be a good time to tell everyone," he says, voice low, "About your...you know."

*Her powers.*

El glances down at her hands before looking back up at Mike. "Why?"

"Well, just think about it," Mike explains, "We're gonna be completely alone in the woods, so you don't have to worry about anyone overhearing you. Plus, both Max and I will be there to help you explain everything."

"That's a good point," El nods, though with slight reluctance.

While they watched soap operas and ate waffles on Saturday, they'd also discussed ways that El could reveal her powers to the rest of their friends. It had to be just right, Mike pointed out, so that their reaction wouldn't be like his reaction. But after finishing off two boxes of Eggos and learning that Jessica's sister, who was thought to be dead, is really alive and having an affair with Robert, her long-lost half-brother, Mike and El still hadn't come up with any plan. The subject was eventually dropped in favor of discussing how "totally insane" soap operas were (Mike's words, not hers).

El knew that she was going to have to tell her friends, she just didn't think it was going to be as soon as this weekend.

"Do you think you're ready?" Mike asks concernedly.

El sighs and shrugs her shoulders. "I don't know, but...I think I should get it over with."

"Yeah," Mike nods, "I think so too."

"You'll help me?" El asks, glancing up at him.

"Yeah, totally!" Mike assures her, "I promised you! I'll make sure that they don't freak out like I did."

El gives him a small, relieved smile as she feels herself relax. "Thank you," she murmurs.

Mike smiles back, nods, and leans forward in his seat to give her a quick little hug.

Before he can move away, El grasps him tighter and holds the hug longer, not wanting to leave his arms. She nuzzles her face into his shoulder, taking in both the scent of his Ivory soap and of the fabric softener that lingers on his hoodie.

*Safe.*

---

On Tuesday, everyone stays late after school to finish the video. The time is mostly comprised of Max teasing the guys, Dustin getting offended, Lucas not-so-subtly drooling over Max, and Will and Mike trying to keep them all on task. Even though El doesn't know much about film editing, she still hangs around to give moral support (and to pass out lots of caffeine-filled sodas for stamina). They finish the video around 8 pm, and when they're done, they're all pleased with the final product.

"If this doesn't get on the news," Max says after they drop off the finished tape at the main office, "I'm gonna torch Mr. Coleman's car again."

"Because that's a reasonable reaction," Dustin replies dryly.

Since they finish editing the video early, they get to spend

Wednesday solely focused on planning their upcoming camping trip. Though El's excited, she can't help but worry. While everyone else already got their parents' permission to go on the trip, El has yet to ask Hopper for his, mainly because she's almost 100% certain that he's going to say no. He'd just met Mike, and while Hopper had admittedly treated him well, El can't help but feel like she's asking for too much too soon.

When she confides these concerns to Max after school, Max offers to help El ask Hopper, a proposition that El readily accepts.

Since Hopper is still on duty, the girls decide to visit him at the police station. While El doesn't spend a lot of time there, the secretary, Flo, is always super nice, and Max always gets a kick out of messing around with the handcuffs, badges, and other police equipment that Hopper now says are 'Off Limits.'

As the two girls walk down the sidewalk with their skateboards under their arms, El shares the details of her planned confession.

"So, you're going to tell all of them?" Max summarizes.

El nods.

"And this is all Wheeler's idea?"

"Sort of," El frowns, "But...I want to do it. I don't want to lie to my friends."

Max nods. "Yeah, that makes sense."

They walk in silence for a moment before Max speaks up again. "Well, I got your back, okay?" She assures El.

"Thank you," El smiles gratefully, before reluctantly adding, "But it won't matter if I don't get my Dad's permission."

"Why wouldn't he give it to you?"

El gives Max a wary look. "He made me keep the door open when Mike was in my room. I know he won't be happy about us going to the woods, alone."

"But you won't be alone," Max points out, "The rest of us will all be there."

"That's true," El admits.

"Plus, if your Dad wants, I'll make sure that you and Mike are never alone together. I'll be your personal third wheel."

"But then Lucas will be lonely," El teases.

The late-afternoon air is rather chilly, so when Max gives off an exaggerated, indignant huff, her breath fogs into a wispy mist. "What?!"

El holds back a smirk, instead keeping her expression innocently inquisitive. "I thought you liked him?"

"No!" Max fervently exclaims.

"You were holding his hand during the movie. You sat by him on Monday."

"So?! That doesn't mean anything."

El can't hold back her smile any longer. Max likes Lucas so much, it's completely obvious. She can try to deny it all she likes, but El sees right through it.

"Are you dating him?" El asks, studying Max's reaction closely.

"No," Max answers, rolling her eyes dismissively.

"Do you want to?" El smiles, giving her a light nudge.

In a rather out-of-character reaction, Max actually blushes and seems a little flustered. "Maybe," she mutters.

El opens her mouth to gasp excitedly, but Max quickly moves in and clamps her hand over it.

"Don't!" Max hisses, "You can't tell him, or anyone!"

El nods, still smiling elatedly.

*Max likes Lucas and Lucas likes Max and they're probably going to date and everything is perfect!*

She's about to voice these elated thoughts to Max, but then she realizes they've finally arrived at the station. Her thought process shifts to the main task at hand: convincing her Dad that allowing her to spend a night in the woods with her friends is a good idea.

Flo greets the girls when they enter and cheerily guides them back to Hopper's office.

"Hey, Hop!" Flo calls out as she knocks on the closed door, "Your 3 o'clock is here."

"I don't have anyone at 3 o'clock," Hopper grumpily replies from inside.

El and Max have to bite down on their bottom lips to keep from giggling out loud.

"Well, I got two people here who really need to talk to you," Flo continues, smiling at the girls.

"Send them in," Hopper sighs.

Flo gives the girls a wink before walking off. El and Max give her appreciative waves before El moves forward, turns the doorknob, and steps inside.

Hopper is seated behind his desk, surrounded by empty white mugs, miscellaneous documents, and a couple untouched apples (El doesn't know why Flo insists on giving Hopper apples every morning — he never eats them and El just winds up throwing them away after they start to rot). When Hopper sees the two girls walk in, he's surprised at first, but his expression quickly relaxes into a warm smile.

"Hey, kids," he greets, putting his feet up on his desk.

"Hi, Dad!" El smiles, trying to stay calm. Her dad is so much more intimidating when he's in full uniform, and as she and Max sit in the two chairs in front of his desk, she can't help but feel like one of the suspects in his cases.

"What are you two doing here?" Hopper asks, glancing at them, "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Max shrugs. She slumps back in her chair and puts her feet up on the desk, mimicking Hopper's pose.

"Really?" Hopper asks flatly.

El forces herself to smile, though she feels like crumbling. What if she's the only one who can't go on the trip? Would they go without her?

"I...uh...have to ask you something," El states, trying to sound as confident as possible.

"Okay," Hopper replies, eyeing her cautiously.

"I want...I want to go camping."

"Camping?!"

"...With my friends."

Hopper blinks at her, confused.

El takes a deep breath and without further hesitation, proceeds to spill out the entire plan, from where she'd be going (the woods near the quarry), how she'd get there (she would skate to Will's house Saturday morning, or Hopper could drive her, if he really wanted), how long she'd be gone (they'd hike Saturday afternoon, camp in the evening, come back Sunday morning), and who would be coming with her (Max, Mike — yes, *that* Mike — Dustin, Lucas, and Will).

When she finally finishes, she's slightly breathless from talking so much. As she stops to catch her breath, she crosses her fingers under her seat, hoping that her dad will be understanding.

There's a minute of silence has Hopper processes all this information. As it starts to settle in, he takes his feet off his desk and furrows his brow.

"Let me get this straight," Hopper finally says, leaning forward, "You

want to spend a night in the woods, alone, with a bunch of teenage boys?"

"Not just teenage boys," Max pipes up, "I'm gonna be there."

Hopper eyes Max, most likely dwelling on the fact that that's not the most comforting news.

"It's for Will!" El pleadingly continues.

"Byers?"

"Yes. He used to take the trip with his brother, but now he left for college."

Hopper nods. "Yeah, I know. I know the Byers. I...I went to high school with their mother. We were pretty close."

Max snorts. "What, did you like her?"

Hopper and El both turn to look at Max indignantly, Hopper especially.

"*Max!*" El hisses, hoping that her chances of getting her dad's approval weren't about to be thrown away like one of Flo's daily apples.

"I did not like her," Hopper huffs, though he looks slightly flustered, "I'm just saying I *know* her, so I know her boys. Will's a good kid."

"He's Mike's best friend," El adds quickly, "Well, one of them."

"Is that so?" Hopper remarks. He keeps studying El, but El can't read his expression.

"If it makes you feel better, I can be your eyes and ears the entire time, Chief," Max offers, "I'll make sure that El doesn't get into any Mike-related shenanigans."

El, cheeks burning, throws Max a dirty look. She's not sure if that statement is going to help or hurt her chances of getting permission, and with the stoic look on Hopper's face, there's no way for her to

tell.

It seems to work though, if the way Hopper proceeds to smile is any indication.

"I'm not that worried about Mike," Hopper admits.

"Why not?" El frowns, not liking his tone.

Hopper hesitates. "Well, you know, he just seems kinda..."

"Like, the biggest nerd ever?" Max finishes.

Hopper hesitates again, but then nods and shrugs. "Yeah."

Even though this is pretty much true, El can't help but feel offended on behalf of Mike. "He is not!" She insists.

Hopper and Max only exchange knowing looks.

"He's not!" El huffs, slumping back in her chair.

"He seems like a nice kid," Hopper amends, sounding like he's trying not to laugh.

"He is," El grumbles.

Hopper gives her a small smile before stopping to think.

*He's deciding.*

Another minute passes, though it feels more like an hour. El keeps her fingers crossed as her heart pounds in her chest.

*Please, please, please, please!*

Finally, Hopper gives a sigh and replies, grudgingly saying, "I guess you can go."

"Really?" El replies, breath hitching.

"Only," Hopper warms, holding up a finger, "If you promise to behave."

He turns his finger to point it at Max. "You'll keep an eye on Wheeler?"

"Totally!" Max nods.

"Okay."

El leaps out of her chair and leans across the desk to give him a hug. "Thank you!" She beams, heart soaring.

Hopper returns the hug, patting El on the back. "Don't do anything stupid, okay?"

"I won't, I promise."

Hopper nods and relinquishes the hug. "Alright, kid," he replies, "You better get going, I got a lot of work to catch up with."

"Okay!" El nods.

She and Max both prepare to exit the room, but just as El reaches the doorway, she remembers that she almost forgot one of the most important parts.

"Dad?" She asks nervously, turning to face the desk again.

Hopper glances up at her. "Yeah?"

El swallows. She's probably asking for too much at once, but if she doesn't do it now, she'll miss her chance.

And so, tone mild and hesitant, she voices her next request.

"Can I have \$5?"

---

It's Thursday afternoon and El is standing in the parking lot of Bradley's Big Buy with the rest of her friends.

"Alright, did everyone get the five dollars?" Mike asks, standing in front of the group.

Everyone nods, digs into their pockets, and retrieves a bill to show

him.

As El shows off the \$5 she was able to get from Hopper, she can't help but smile. Now that she's been given the all-clear from her dad, she feels as if she can finally allow herself to be excited.

While they were planning the trip on Wednesday, Dustin pointed out that they were going to need food for their travels. Will wholeheartedly agreed, mentioning that he and Jonathan always had a great time making s'mores. Lucas worried that they wouldn't have enough money to afford food, so Mike proposed that they all ask their parents for just \$5, that way when they all put their money together, they'd have a lot.

*Mike's so smart like that*, El dreamily muses, smiling at Mike as he continues to say something. What he's saying — she's not sure, but he looks really cute saying it. He's wearing a blue collared sweater under his windbreaker, and El is probably enjoying the sight more than she should. As she continues to gaze at him, she takes note that his wounds from the fight have finally started to heal. While he still has scars and a few bruises, he doesn't have to wear the band-aids anymore, and his face looks less discolored overall.

She snaps out of her lovesick daze when she realizes that Mike is now yelling at someone. She flinches, startled, and glances over her shoulder to see that Dustin and Lucas have climbed inside a shopping cart, and Max is pushing said shopping cart in figure-8's around the parking lot.

"Holy shit!" Dustin and Lucas gleefully exclaim as Max zooms around.

"Stop! We're gonna get kicked out!" Mike exclaims, irritated. "What are you guys even doing?!"

"We wanted to see how fast I could push them!" Max calls back as Lucas and Dustin cheer her on.

Mike sighs and frowns, but El and Will both give him comforting smiles.

"I'm sorry," El smiles sheepishly, even though she knows that she

really has nothing to do with their friends' antics.

"It's not your fault," Mike grumbles.

"Don't worry," Will reassures them, "I know what will get them over here." He turns and cups his hands around his mouth, but even when he proceeds to call out to the others, his voice still isn't very loud. "If you guys don't stop, we're gonna get sugar-free marshmallows and whole-grain graham crackers!"

The shopping cart comes to a screeching halt.

"What?!" Dustin and Max snap, sounding disgusted.

Sure enough, that does the trick.

Five minutes later, they're hurrying down the aisles of the grocery store together. Will pushes the cart, reading off a shopping list that he composed, while the rest of the group darts around, listening to his instructions.

They get a little bit of everything: cereal, juice boxes, water bottles, hot dogs, trail mix, potato chips, cookies, and, perhaps most importantly, plenty of supplies to make s'mores.

When the time comes to check out, they all step up towards the register and place their \$5 bill into the hand of the slightly confused-looking cashier.

The money they have left over, while not much, is given to Mike. The group, despite Mike's humble protests, insists that he should keep it so that he can start saving up for a new bike.

"Thanks, guys," Mike blushes as everyone grabs a shopping bag and heads out the door.

"This is gonna be the best trip ever!" Dustin exclaims.

"You know, I've actually never been camping," Max admits.

"How?!" Lucas gapes.

Max shrugs. "I dunno. It's just not really something my family does."

"Well, I'll have to teach you then," Lucas states, gently nudging his arm against hers.

"Fine, whatever," Max replies with an eye roll.

El has to clamp her mouth shut in order to not giggle out loud. They like each other and it's so obvious and—

"Are they like, dating?" Someone mumbles into her ear.

El is startled, but when she looks over her shoulder, she sees that it's just Mike.

"Not yet," El whispers back, eyes shining with mischief.

Mike smirks back with a small shake of his head, as if he can't believe they aren't together yet.

As El smiles at him, heart fluttering, she can't help but feel the same.

---

El and Max both decide in advance to dress down for the camping trip. They agree to ditch the eyeshadow, hairspray, and leather jackets in exchange for softer, more comfortable attire.

When Saturday morning comes, El borrows one of her dad's flannel jackets, which is more than enough to keep her warm, even if it is really large on her. She also decides to keep her hair natural. While she's slightly worried about getting teased by the other guys, the whole point of this trip, at least from her standpoint, is revealing her true self to them.

Plus, it had felt amazing when Mike ran his fingers through her curly hair, so maybe, he'd like, do that again.

Hopper offers to drive her to the Byers', which is a little surprising, since El knows he has a lot of tough case files that he's supposed to be working on. Nevertheless, she accepts the offer gratefully. Skateboarding while also lugging a sleeping bag and heavy backpack was not a feat that she was looking forward to.

When they pull up at Will's house, everyone else is waiting outside in the front yard. There's an older, pretty woman with mussed brown hair talking to Will, her hands on his shoulders. She's short, Mike's taller than her, but she still stands out amongst the clamor of jabbering teenagers.

"Is that Will's Mom?" El asks, turning to glance at Hopper as he pulls the car to a stop.

El's never seen her dad look anything close to shy, but that's the only word she can think of to describe the way he's glancing over at Ms. Byers.

"Yeah, that's Joyce," he nods, hastily averting his gaze back towards El.

El eyes him. He's acting so weird. "Do you want to talk to her?"

Hopper gives a gruff, indifferent sort of huff.

El rolls her eyes. "C'mon," she says, stepping out of the car.

Hopper composes himself and follows El. As they approach the group, her friends turn to greet them excitedly.

"You're here!" Mike beams.

"Finally!" Max grins.

"HOLY SHIT! Your hair!" Dustin squawks. "What happened?!"

"Dude!" Lucas snaps, punching Dustin in the arm, "Shut up!"

"I think it looks nice," Will states, giving Dustin a disapproving frown.

El feels her cheeks start to burn as she shyly tucks a curl behind her ear. "Thank you."

"Yeah, it does," Dustin quickly adds, rubbing his arm, "You look great!"

Joyce steps forward to give El a warm hug. "You must be Eleanor,"

she says, pulling back to examine El's face.

El nods shyly. "Yes."

"Will's told me so much about you," she continues, "More than your dad has, anyway."

Hopper, who's been hovering on the sidelines this whole time, flushes pink at this. "Hello' to you too," he grumbles.

Joyce gently pulls away from El and moves to stand in front of Hopper. Her smallness compared to Hopper's largeness makes for an interesting contrast, to say the least. Will's Mom has to crane her neck way back to even make eye contact with Hopper.

"Hopp," she smiles.

"Joyce," Hopper smiles back.

Will's Mom steps forward to give Hopper a hug, though her face only meets his upper torso.

El frowns, still a little confused as to how weird they're acting. She turns to glance at Will, hoping for an explanation, but he looks just as puzzled as she does.

As Hopper and Joyce begin exchanging pleasantries, El steps closer to her friends. Everyone's sporting bulging backpacks, bundled in warm coats, and carrying a sleeping bag under their arm.

Max is wearing a beanie with a large pom-pom on the top. The pom-pom bounces around as Max tilts her head to the side, and El has to force herself to not laugh at how funny it looks. "I'm pretty sure your dad likes Will's mom," she comments, eyeing Hopper and Joyce.

Will's brow furrows in confusion, but he shakes it off, instead turning his attention back to El. "Is that a camera?" He asks, motioning to El's torso.

El glances down where indeed, she has her Polaroid camera hanging around her neck. It's kind of a bulky thing, but she loves using it to take photos of her and Max whenever they hang out. "Yes," she nods,

smiling at Will, "I wanted to take pictures."

"Me too!" Will enthuses, pointing to the camera hanging around his own neck.

El's eyes widen curiously as she leans in to look at Will's camera. It's different from hers; it has a bigger lens and more buttons to work with.

"It's a 35 millimeter Pentax MX," Will says proudly, "It's Jonathan's old camera; he let me have it when he got a newer one."

"Where does the picture come out?" El frowns.

"It doesn't, you have to develop it," Will explains, "I can show you sometime, we have a dark room in the school for it!"

"We should get a picture of all of us," Mike smiles, "Before we leave."

"El could use an updated one," Max mutters wryly.

El gives her a warning look, but thankfully, no one else seems to have noticed her comment.

"Good idea!" Will nods. He walks over to his mom, gently tugs on her arm, and asks her to take their picture.

As Will walks her through how to use the camera, El and the others drop their things and huddle together. El and Max stand in the middle with Mike and Lucas at their sides, respectively. Dustin crouches in front of them, and as soon as Will hands the camera to Joyce, he runs over to crouch beside Dustin.

As Mike wraps his arm around El's back, she shivers, and not just because the morning is a little cold.

"Alright," Joyce announces happily, peering into the viewfinder as she aims the camera at the group, "Smile!"

Everyone smiles, leans closer together, and the camera flashes. The flare leaves El's vision dotted with colorful splotches for a moment, and she has to blink several times to get them to go away.

"You all look so cute!" Joyce gushes, causing Will to blush.

"Mom!" He bashfully whines. As he runs over to get his camera back, everyone else picks up their backpacks and sleeping bags again.

"We should probably get going," Lucas reminds them, glancing at his watch, "It's already after 11 o'clock."

"Yeah, and I wanna eat the snacks," Dustin chimes in.

"You already did!" Max snaps.

"Uh, no!?"

"Uh, yeah? Someone opened the box of Fruit Loops!"

"Oh, yeah," Mike hesitates, "That was me."

"What?!" Max exclaims.

"I got hungry!" Mike defends.

"El," Max gripes, "Tell your boyfriend to stop digging into all our food like a weirdo."

"He's not my boyfriend!" El insists at the same time that Mike stammers, "I-I'm not her boyfriend!"

Max, Lucas, and Dustin all exchange doubtful stares just as Will rejoins the group.

"What'd I miss?" Will asks, glancing at everyone.

"Nothing new," Dustin snickers, "We're just ready to go."

Hopper and Joyce step forward to wish the kids goodbye. As Joyce fretfully lists off a series of reminders for Will (all of which Will replies, "Yeah, I know Mom"), El moves in to hug her dad goodbye.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Hopper mumbles, patting the back of her head.

"Tomorrow," El agrees.

They pull away, Hopper gives her one last smile, and El waves goodbye.

"Let's go!" Lucas says eagerly.

"Hopefully we won't get murdered," Max jokes.

As they enter the forest that surrounds Will's house, their feet crunch against the fallen leaves and their backpacks brush against protruding tree branches. Even though the morning is cold, the sky is a clear, vibrant blue.

"We won't get murdered; there's no serial killers out here," Will sighs as he takes the lead.

"Other than Mike," Dustin snorts, "He totally killed all those Fruit Loops."

Everyone but Mike gets a good laugh out of that, Max especially.

"Wheeler's a *cereal* killer!" Max cackles, shaking from how hard she's laughing.

"Yeah, I got that," Mike replies flatly.

---

The camping site isn't too far from Will's house — it only takes a little over an hour until they're there. Will leads them to a small, secluded clearing. Trees stretch on for miles, their branches curving over the clearing, almost protecting the spot. Sunlight filters through the branches, causing the ground of the clearing to look like a mosaic of light and leaves. In the distance, El can make out the rocky bluffs of the Quarry's edge. The air is tinged with the faint scent of clean, crisp freshwater, musky oak trees, and sticky sap.

"Well, here we are!" Will announces, motioning around the clearing, "This is the spot Jonathan and I always come to. It's right by the Quarry, and there's plenty of firewood, and—"

"Isn't this place right by the kissing rock?" Max interrupts, looking around the forest skeptically.

Will pauses and frowns. "The what?"

"I think she's right," Dustin nods, "I mean, I've never been there, but I heard it's in the woods right next to the Quarry."

"It is!" Max nods, "I'm pretty sure it's like...a 5-minute walk from here."

"What's a kissing rock?" El asks, brow furrowing in confusion.

"It's this big boulder by the edge of the quarry where all the kids at school go to like...kiss," Lucas explains, blushing.

"Where all the *lame* kids go," Max corrects.

"I mean, I guess we're by it then?" Will pouts, "I dunno."

"It doesn't matter," Mike huffs, setting down his things, "It's not like any of us are gonna—"

His voice trails off, and El suddenly realizes that he's glancing at *her*. When El sees that he's doing this, and Mike sees that El sees that he's doing this, they both look away from each other quickly, cheeks crimson.

"Whatever," Max sighs, shrugging the entire conversation off, "Let's just unpack."

Everyone else nods and proceeds to do so.

It takes the entire first half of the afternoon to set up camp. Will designates that they leave the center of the clearing for building the fire, so everyone else sets up their sleeping bags in a radial formation around it (first Lucas, then Max, then El, then Mike, then Will, and finally Dustin). After the sleeping bags are rolled out, the group proceeds to hike into the woods in search of sticks and stones for the fire pit.

The forest floor is covered with a thick layer of dead leaves, and El has to kick them all out of the way to find the stray twigs and sticks hidden beneath. As she bundles sticks into her arms, she tries to formulate a way to reveal her powers. She wants to tell them at just

the right time and place, but there doesn't seem to be any organic way to work it into the conversation.

By the time they finish gathering enough supplies to make the fire, it's already late afternoon, and El's mind is still as blank as ever.

"Okay," Will says as soon as they return to the clearing, "We should probably get the fire going."

"Already?" Lucas questions.

Will nods. "It'll keep us warm, and it's kind of hard to start one once it's really dark out."

El's pretty sure that they're all eager for a heat source right now, so Will doesn't need to tell them twice to help him build a fire pit. They follow his instructions eagerly, setting up a circle of stones in the middle of their clearing and placing a pile of sticks and dead leaves inside.

"Great, so, how do we get it started?" Mike asks once they're done.

"We'll just use some matches," Will shrugs. He gets up, goes to kneel beside his backpack, and starts digging through it.

"Can we make s'mores?" Dustin asks, "I'm really hungry."

"Those are for after dinner!" Lucas disputes.

"Says who?"

"Says...I don't know! Rational people!"

"We could have s'mores for lunch," El points out, "And then again after dinner."

"Yes!" Dustin beams at El, "That sounds like the best idea ever."

"You guys are gonna get a stomach ache," Mike smiles wryly.

"It'd be worth it," Dustin insists, "I wanna eat nothing but s'mores for the rest of my life."

"What about baloney sandwiches?" Max counters dryly.

"Those too."

"Hey, guys?" Will calls out, still rummaging through his backpack,  
"Did you guys take the matches?"

"No," Mike frowns, "Why?"

"I can't find them!" Will says worriedly, turning to look back at the group.

"Are you serious?" Lucas groans.

"I'm sorry!" Will frets, starting to shake a little. "I think I forgot them!"

"Hey, it's okay!" Mike insists. He rushes over to Will's side and gently places his hand on Will's shoulder. "It was an accident!"

"An accident that's gonna leave us cold and hungry," Lucas mutters under his breath.

"What should we do?" El asks, trying to remain calm.

"We could try to start one without matches!" Dustin offers, "You just gotta rub two sticks together! I saw someone do it on TV once!"

"If we wait for that to happen, we'll all freeze to death," Max snorts.

"Well, do you have a better idea?" Dustin snaps crossly.

"Uh, yeah? It's going back to Will's house and getting the matches!"

"But that's like, an hour long walk!" Mike points out, "Plus another hour back! That's *two* hours!"

"I know," Max huffs, "I'll do it." She walks over to where she'd set her things down, picks up her backpack, and slings it over her shoulders.

"But it's dangerous to go alone!" Lucas hesitates.

"Then come with me," Max shrugs.

"Me?"

"Didn't you go to karate camp?"

"Karate camp?" Lucas echoes, confused.

"Remember?" Max raises an eyebrow. "Jennifer's party? Dustin told me you spent all of last summer at karate camp."

Dustin and Lucas exchange quick glances. "Right!" They both exclaim, nodding quickly.

El doesn't remember any of this, but she's pretty sure the boys are lying. Either way, the whole situation is pretty amusing, and she can't help but snort into her palm.

"Then let's go," Max orders, already starting to walk off, "I wanna get back before it gets dark."

"Okay!" Lucas nods, grabbing his backpack before hurrying after her.

"You better not die!" Dustin calls out after them, "If this really is a horror movie, one of you probably isn't going to make it back!"

"Dustin!" Mike scolds.

"What!? I'm just stating the facts!"

"You're being dramatic."

"I'm sorry," Will mumbles woefully, "This is all my fault."

"You make a mistake," El reassures him, "It's not that bad."

Will only pouts in response, still seeming pretty resentful of both the situation and himself.

Mike turns to glance at El, looking pretty helpless.

El racks her mind, trying to think of a way to cheer Will up. "Why don't we take some pictures?" She offers, motioning to both of their cameras.

"Of what?" Will asks curiously.

El shrugs as she glances around their surroundings. "Everything."

Will hesitates, seemingly unsure, but then El raises her camera. "Like you!" She smiles, snapping a picture of Will and Mike.

"El!" Mike exclaims, looking frantic, "I wasn't even ready!"

El catches the polaroid as it slowly prints out of her camera. "I know," she smiles teasingly, slipping the photo into her pocket.

Will smiles back, looking more excited. "Okay!" He nods, rising to his feet.

Time passes by quickly as Will and El explore the clearing together, snapping pictures of everything. The weirdly-shaped knot on a tree trunk, the dandelion peeking out amongst the dead leaves, the squirrel sitting on a tree branch. Mike and Dustin follow them around as they work, pointing out all the potential subjects of interest (including themselves).

Before long, the two hours has nearly passed. The sun is a little lower in the sky and the air has grown colder, but they're having too much fun to notice.

At least, they are until they're abruptly interrupted by the sound of a high-pitched, terrified scream. It echoes through the trees, causing some birds to fly off with a frightened squawk.

"Shit!" Dustin hisses, eyes wide, "What the hell was that?"

"Someone screamed," Mike replies, balling his fists.

"Was that Max?" Will asks worriedly.

"I'm not sure," El frowns, "It didn't sound like her."

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god! We're gonna die!" Dustin exclaims, clutching the sides of his head, "I knew this would happen! I told you, we're tempting the horror fates and now we're all gonna get picked off one by one and—"

Dustin's interrupted by the sound of twigs snapping.

There's a collective gasp as they all jolt in both surprise and fear.

Someone's coming closer.

El takes a deep breath and prepares to raise her hand. This isn't how she planned on revealing her powers, but she's more than willing to do so if it means keeping her friends safe.

As it turns out, her determined gallantry is for naught. Moments later, Lucas marches into the clearing and everyone breathes a sigh of relief.

"Son of a bitch, Lucas, you scared the shit out of us," Dustin says, slumping his shoulders.

Lucas doesn't reply. Instead he looks annoyed. Really annoyed. He drops his backpack onto the ground with a grumpy huff, not really making eye contact with anyone.

"Did you get the matches?" Will asks hesitantly.

"Yes!" Lucas snaps, sounding just as irritated as he looks.

El doesn't know why Lucas is so upset, but moments later she gets her answer when Max rushes into the clearing. She's holding a box of matches in one hand and a metallic, sharp-looking object in the other.

"C'mon, Lucas!" Max laughs, "Are you still pissed off at me?"

"Yes!" Lucas scowls, crossing his arms.

"Wait, what happened?" Mike questions, glancing at both of them.

"When we were walking back, Max thought it'd be funny to hide behind some bushes and jump out at me!" Lucas snaps bitterly. "She snuck off, and I thought she was hurt or something, but no! She just wanted to scare me! With a knife!"

"It was funny!" Max counters, "You screamed like a girl!"

"You had a knife?" El frowns.

"It's not even a real knife!" Max defends, "It's from my old Michael Myers costume."

"Why did you bring it?"

"Just in case," Max shrugs.

"It doesn't matter!" Lucas replies brusquely, "It wasn't funny!"

"I thought it was!"

"Well, you thought wrong!" Lucas dismisses.

With that, he storms off again, disappearing amongst the countless trees that surround the clearing. He leaves both a tangibly awkward silence and a worried-looking Max in his wake.

"Here," Max mutters surly, tossing the box of matches to the guys.

Mike, Dustin, and Will exchange uncomfortable glances, but ultimately decide to turn their attention back to the main task at hand: starting the fire.

El, on the other hand, walks over to Max, not wanting to leave her feeling upset. "Are you okay?" She asks gently.

"Not really," Max grumbles.

"It's ok," El murmurs, placing a comforting hand on Max's shoulder. "It was just a prank."

"I didn't think he'd get so mad," Max mutters, not looking directly at El.

El pauses. Even though she doesn't want to hurt Max's feelings, she ultimately decides that it'd be best to tell her the truth.

"You pretend to not like things, even though you do," El states, making sure to keep her voice low.

"That's not true!" Max protests.

"It is," El nods, not bothering to waste time further arguing this fact, "I know it. But Lucas doesn't. He doesn't know that you teasing him so much is good. You tease him because you like him, but I think...he might think you're doing it to be mean to him."

Max's head droops as she silently considers this.

"I think you should be honest with him," El advises.

"Be honest?"

"Tell him how you feel."

"Like...that I *like* him?" Max gulps, looking terrified.

"That you don't hate him."

"Oh."

El watches as Max shuffles in place, contemplating what to do.

"I guess you're right," Max finally admits. She drops her backpack, tosses her prop knife onto her sleeping bag, and turns to smile gratefully at El. "I'll go talk to him."

"Good luck," El smiles back, giving Max a reassuring hug.

Max nods before darting off, running off in the same direction that Lucas had.

El's smile falters as an uneasy feeling starts to churn in her gut. As she turns to rejoin the others, she can't help but feel incredibly guilty. Here she is, telling Max that she needs to be honest with Lucas, and yet, she still hasn't managed to tell her friends about her powers. She's a giant hypocrite.

Will has the beginnings of a small fire going. There's a faint trail of smoke streaming from the fire pit, and the sound of crackling leaves fills the air.

"Wouldn't it be awesome if we didn't even need matches?" Dustin comments as Will gently blows into the glowing embers.

"What do you mean?" Mike frowns, eyeing Dustin.

"Like, if I had superpowers," Dustin elaborates, "Like Pyro."

"Pyro?" El blanches, wondering if that's some kind of codename. Does Dustin know? How did he figure it out? Did Mike or Max tell him? No, they wouldn't, not without telling her that they'd told him—

"From the X-Men comics?" Dustin offers.

"Oh," El flushes. Even though she feels slightly dumb for rushing to judgment, she's still left rattled. She just doesn't know how to tell them. It has to be as normal as possible, with seems highly improbable. She almost wishes that it was a serial killer that'd walked out of the trees, and not Lucas. At least then she wouldn't have to use any words.

Even though El's trying to remain outwardly calm, Mike seems to notice how anxious she looks, because he suddenly gets up and walks over to her.

"Do you wanna talk?" He whispers.

El meets his eye and nods gratefully. "Please."

"Okay," Mike murmurs before turning back to Will and Dustin to announce, "We're gonna be right back!"

"Sure you are," Dustin snorts.

Mike rolls his eyes indifferent and doesn't reply, instead grasping El's hand and leading her off down a forest trail.

El blushes as their fingers intertwine, but she accepts the comforting gesture gratefully. "I'm sorry," she mumbles as soon as Dustin and Will are out of earshot.

"For what?" Mike asks concernedly.

"For being so nervous," El answers, "I just..I don't know how to tell them. I don't want to just blurt it out."

"You don't have to be sorry for being nervous," Mike reminds her, "I would be nervous, too."

El nods, grasping Mike's hand a little tighter. She remembers how shocked Dustin had been upon seeing her hair this morning. If curly hair had been enough to make him shout *HOLY SHIT*, she could only imagine how learning she had powers would make him react.

"Well, there's no pressure to do it right now," Mike points out, "We can wait until the night, that way you'll have more time to think about what you want to say."

El glances upwards, towards the sky. The blue sky is already beginning to fade. The days feel so much shorter as November draws closer. Waiting until the night still doesn't give her much time.

"It'll be okay, I promise," Mike assures her, giving her hand a squeeze.

"Okay," El murmurs.

It's not until El pauses and looks around that she realizes they've walked a pretty good distance away from the camp. They've exited the wooded area and are now standing on the rocky terrain that surrounds the top of the quarry. There are large boulders scattered about, and El realizes that one of them is probably the kissing rock.

*Oh.*

El feels herself flush pink as she cautiously turns to glance at Mike. He seems to be thinking the same thing, if the way he's flushing bright red is any indignation.

El bites her lip shyly, and Mike turns to meet her gaze. "Maybe we should—" He begins.

"Yes?" El asks hopefully.

Mike swallows, still blushing like crazy, but then his gaze moves to something just beyond El's shoulder. "*Holy shit!*" He whispers, eyes widening.

El pales. "What?"

"Look!" Mike says, still whispering. He uses the hand that's not intertwined with hers to point behind her, and El cautiously turns around to look.

She spots two figures sitting on a large rock about 20 or so feet away. At first she can't tell who it is, but then she spots that silly pom-pom hat and the long, vibrant red hair tucked underneath it.

Max. Talking to...Lucas. Their heads are ducked low together, deep in conversation. Since they're so far away, El can't make out what they're saying.

"What are they doing?" Mike murmurs.

"She was going to say sorry," El murmurs back, "For scaring him."

"Oh."

El hesitates, unsure of whether or not she and Mike should leave. She can't help but feel like they've walked in on something, even if Max and Lucas are just talking.

She's just about to voice this concern to Mike when suddenly, without any hesitation, Max shakes her head, cups Lucas' cheeks in her hands, pulls him towards her, and presses her lips to his in a firm kiss.

El hears a gasp, and she's not quite sure if it's from her or Mike. Maybe both of them. Either way, her brain seems to have stopped working, because she's instantly overwhelmed with surprise, happiness, and excitement all at the same time.

"She kissed him!" El whispers gleefully, turning to beam at Mike.

"I can see that," Mike replies bashfully, averting his eyes away from the still lip-locked couple.

El bounces in place excitedly, squeezing Mike's hand in order to keep herself steady. "On the kissing rock!"

"Where all the 'lame' kids go," Mike jokes, pitching his voice higher in what is apparently his best Max impression.

El giggles as she gives Mike a gentle, chiding nudge.

A beat of silence passes as they both turn to steal one more glance at Max and Lucas.

"We should probably go," Mike whispers, motioning his head in their direction.

"Yes," El nods, still beaming.

Mike, still clutching her hand, pulls her back into the woods. As they hurry back to camp, El just can't stop giggling. She's just so *happy* for her best friend that there aren't even enough words to express it.

By the time she and Mike reach the clearing, the sky is a rich ochre and a few crickets have begun to chirp. Dustin and Will have successfully gotten a fire going, and the flickering flames cast dancing shadows against the surrounding trees.

El and Mike release each other's hands and come to sit beside the fire, both grinning from ear-to-ear.

"What's so funny?" Will asks, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Nothing!" El smiles.

"Ugh, ew, I don't even wanna know what you guys just did," Dustin frowns, wrinkling his nose. "It's probably going to ruin my s'mores appetite."

"It's not like that," Mike insists, throwing Dustin a look.

"Uh, huh. Whatever you say, Mike."

Thankfully, neither Dustin or Will presses them for any further information, and instead focus on setting up the fire for hot dog roasting.

15 minutes later, Max and Lucas rejoin the group. As they step into the clearing, El studies them carefully. If she hadn't seen them kissing with her own eyes, she never would have guessed that they had. Their expressions are neutral and they're not holding hands or

anything. Lucas' cheeks look a little more flushed than usual, but that's about it.

"What took you guys so long?" Dustin asks as Max and Lucas come to sit with everyone else.

"We just talked for awhile," Max shrugs, grabbing a roasting stick and a hot dog. She comes to sit beside El, face completely unreadable.

"How did your talk go?" El quietly asks, making sure to keep her tone nonchalant.

"Fine," Max breezily murmurs back. "He's not mad anymore."

"That's not surprising," El mutters under her breath.

"What?" Max asks, sounding confused.

"Nothing!" El quickly amends, "I'm glad you talked."

Max eyes her warily but ultimately turns her attention back to the fire pit. "Me too," she says, and even though El knows Max's trying to hide it, there's no missing the faint smile pulling at the corners of her lips.

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"—And with that, the creature gave off a final screech, dragging his last victim into the night," Dustin concludes dramatically.

"How the hell is that a scary story?" Max snaps.

"Because the dog turned into a giant, killer lizard!" Dustin defends.

It's long after nightfall. The forest is pitch black and the only light comes from the crackling fire.

After the hot dog roast and the seemingly endless, completely delicious s'mores feast, Max suggested that they all tell scary stories. They all gathered around the campfire, seated atop their sleeping bags, faces illuminated by the glow of the warm flames. Max had kicked things off with a story about a deranged killer with a hook for a hand that stalked the forests of Hawkins. After that, any story

would have really paled in comparison, but Dustin's tale of a boy adopting a dog that secretly turned out to be a lizard seemed especially weak.

"Lizards aren't scary," Max snorts.

"They can be!" Dustin insists. He turns to glance at the rest of the group for validation. "Right?"

"Not really," Will yawns, looking a little sleepy.

"Well, it was a *killer* lizard," Dustin reminds them.

El is trying to focus on the stories, she really is, but her mind is still elsewhere. She feels like she's not actively engaging with her friends, but rather, waiting on the sidelines, praying for a way to work her confession into the conversation.

"Killer lizards are still just lizards," Lucas says, shaking his head, "They're not scary."

"What about Godzilla?" Dustin points out.

"You didn't say it turned into Godzilla," Lucas counters.

"What do you think, Mike?" Dustin asks.

"Honestly?" Mike shrugs, "When you said killer lizard, all I could picture is that newt Mr. Clarke had in the terrarium back in 8th grade. With like...little fangs."

The conversation is going nowhere. Nowhere near telekinesis, at least. El realizes that she probably gave up her perfect chance when Dustin had mentioned the X-men, and instantly hates herself for it. She had her opportunity practically handed to her, but she'd freaked out and given it up. She could be such a knucklehead...

"El?" Dustin pleads, turning to her, "Please tell me that you think my story was scary. You're my only hope!"

"Now you're quoting Star Wars?" Max smirks.

"Now you're recognizing Star Wars?" Dustin smirks back.

"I am not!" Max insists.

"You literally just did!"

"Are you even gonna let El answer?" Mike huffs.

They're all growing a little louder, and little more heated, and all the commotion is making El's head hurt.

"Does El need to answer?" Max snorts, "Literally nobody thought that story was scary."

"And your hook-hand story was?" Dustin glowers.

"Uh, yeah!"

"Uh, no! Having a hook for a hand isn't scary!"

"Yes, it is!"

"Captain Hook has a hook for a hand!" Dustin points out, "And he's from a kids' movie!"

"Can you guys please stop fighting?" Will pleads, "It's getting kind of late."

"Dustin is the one who keeps on arguing!" Max insists.

"Am not!" Dustin argues, "It's not my fault her opinions are wrong!"

"Your opinions aren't facts, Dustin!" Lucas retorts.

El doesn't know what comes over her. She just wants everyone to stop arguing over their dumb stories, and her head hurts, and she's just so frustrated and tired of trying to wait for the perfect moment that's probably never going to come. And so, before she can't stop to second-guess herself, she just blurts it out.

"I'm a telekinetic!" She bursts.

That shuts everyone up quickly.

Mike and Max's heads snap over to El, looking startled. Will sits up a little straighter, suddenly looking less tired. Lucas and Dustin both freeze, eyes wide.

"Wait, what'd you say?" Dustin asks, cautiously.

"El?!" Mike hisses, sounding confused. Since his sleeping bag is located next to hers, he's able to reach out and grab her arm in a protective manner.

El gently shrugs him off with a shake of her head. Even though she'd initially pleaded for Mike's help, she now knows that she needs to do this on her own. She needs to come to term with her abilities once and for all, no more hiding, no more secrets.

"I'm a telekinetic," she repeats, keeping her gaze locked on her friends, "I have superpowers."

Lucas, Will, and Dustin exchange confused glances. They look at Max and Mike for some sort of explanation, but Mike and Max only have eyes for El. They both give her encouraging nods, silently showing their support.

"Wait, are you being serious?" Lucas questions, looking hesitant.

El nods solemnly.

"A telekinetic?" Will asks slowly, "Like...you can move stuff with your mind?"

El hesitates. The easiest way to get them to understand is going to be by showing them. Taking a deep breath, she raises her hand, points it at the fire pit, and uses her powers to raise one of the burning sticks into the air. As it hovers before their eyes, spinning slowly, flickering embers crackle off the stick and drift off into the cold night air, extinguishing with a faint whisper.

After several seconds, she relinquishes her hold on the stick and allows it to fall back into the flames.

"Holy shit," Lucas breathes, looking floored.

"That's so cool," Will whispers, eyes wide with wonder.

Dustin, shockingly, still hasn't talked. He seems to be responding in the same way that Mike did: stupefied, unadulterated shock. His jaw is hanging open, his eyes are nearly bugging out of his head, and for a moment El worries that she might have broken him.

"H-how?" He finally manages to stammer.

El proceeds to give them an abridged version of her history, starting from growing up in the lab, escaping with Hopper, becoming his legal daughter, and finally joining their class in the 6th grade. She explains how her powers work, how she was the one who saved them at Jennifer's party, how she broke Troy's arm. By the time she's finished, she's left emotionally exhausted and slightly out-of-breath, but satisfied all the same.

"Oh my god," Dustin whispers, still frozen in place.

"That's so COOL!" Lucas exclaims, "Like, *holy shit!*"

"Right!?" Mike beams, "El's amazing!"

"Wait, you knew?" Will asks, looking surprised.

"She told me last week," Mike nods.

"And you didn't tell us?" Lucas exclaims, sounding a little offended.

"I told him not to," El cuts in.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" Will asks curiously.

"Because," El mumbles, suddenly feeling a little sheepish, "I...I didn't like being different. I wanted to be normal, like you guys."

"Us? Normal?" Lucas jokes.

"You know what I mean," El smiles wryly, "I didn't want to be a freak."

"Well, you're definitely not a freak," Dustin beams. It appears that his

mouth has finally started working again, as he proceeds to ramble quickly and excitedly. "You're so awesome! Like, the coolest person ever! You're like a wizard, or a superhero, or Yoda!"

"Or a mage," Mike adds affectionately, giving El a playful nudge.

"Yeah!" Dustin gushes, before pausing and adding, "Oh my god, I'm so sorry I that ever called you our enemy, and a murderer, and a Drow!"

"What?" El frowns.

"Nothing!" Dustin hastily backtracks. "I just...uh..I'm really happy you're our friend."

"Me too," Will nods, "And not just because of your powers. You were always nice to us, even when we judged you at first."

El flushes pink, unsure of how to react to the unexpected slew of compliments. "I'm happy we're friends too," she murmurs, ducking her head shyly.

"Just so you guys know, we can't tell anyone else about El's powers," Mike pipes up, "We have to keep it a secret, just between all of us."

"Of course!" Will nods.

"I'll never tell anyone!" Lucas agrees.

"Never!" Dustin insists.

El feels her heart swell with happiness. The feeling of finally feeling accepted not only by her friends, but by herself, radiates within her, leaving her warm and bubbly inside.

She reaches out to grasp Max's hand. Max smiles and blushingly grabs Lucas' hand. Then Lucas grabs Dustin's, Dustin grabs Will's, Will grabs Mike's, and Mike finally closes the circle by grasping El's free hand.

As they all grasp each other's hands tightly, huddled around the warm light of the fire, no further words need to be said. They're friends, but their bond isn't like everyone else's. Their friendship isn't the kind that'll just dissipate after high school or over a silly

argument. It's the kind that'll keep them all connected for years to come, through good times and bad times, through whatever toils they'll have to face.

El isn't sure how she knows all this, since she can't see into the future, or anything, but as she smiles at each of them, she knows that it's true. She can hear it in her heart like a whisper, like a promise, reminding her that this moment is one she'll remember.

It's the start of the rest of her life.

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The night is calm and the forest is still. Off in the distance, the reverberating hoot of an owl echoes through the trees.

El's not sure what time it is, but she knows it's late. Everyone else is nestled inside their sleeping bags and the fire has died down to its last glowing coals. Consequently, it's cold. *Very* cold. Despite her sleeping bag, flannel jacket, and thick sweater, El feels the chill settle into every pore. It makes it hard to sleep, and while El definitely doesn't regret coming on this camping trip, she'd be lying if she said she didn't miss her warm bed and soft quilt.

She flips onto her side, hoping that maybe if she moves around a little, she'll be able to keep warm.

It doesn't work.

El sighs and flips onto her other side. She's now facing Mike, who's bundled up inside his sleeping bag less than a foot away from her. Since he's situated so close to her, she's able to make out his features in the faded silvery light of the moon. As she shuffles around, she sees his eyes flutter open.

"Mike? Are you awake?" El whispers, even though it's pretty obvious that he is.

"Yeah," Mike whispers back, locking eyes with her.

"What time is it?"

Mike shuffles a bit around before he manages to pull his arm out of

his sleeping bag. "Like, 3 am?" He whispers, eyeing his watch.

"Oh."

"Can't sleep?"

El shakes her head.

"Me neither."

"It's just...it's pretty cold," El murmurs, shivering slightly.

"Yeah," Mike agrees with a quirked smile, "I guess that's what happens when you go camping in the fall."

El nods and wraps her sleeping bag more tightly around herself. Even though she doesn't want to look like a dopey weakling in front of Mike, she can't stop her teeth from chattering.

"You look really cold," Mike murmurs concernedly.

"I'm o-kay," El lies, "I j-just need to f-fall asleep."

Mike looks her over for a moment before his cheeks start to flush red. "Maybe," he begins, voice cracking a little, "You could, like...uh..."

"W-what?" El shivers.

Mike smiles nervously. "Like...come over here?"

Now El's the one blushing bright red. "N-next to you?"

"There's room," Mike explains, looking flustered, "And you'd be warmer."

That's definitely true. El's not even next to him yet, and already she feels incredibly warm (mostly from blushing so much, though).

"Okay," El whispers with a small shrug.

"Really?" Mike whispers back, sounding like he's trying (and failing) to not seem too hopeful.

El nods.

With shaking hands, Mike moves his hands down to unzip the side of his sleeping bag. El quietly wriggles out of her own, crawls over to Mike, and snuggles up against him.

As Mike zips the sleeping bag closed again, El instantly feels enveloped in warmth.

Mike slides over so that El can rest her head on the pillow with him. As she wriggles upwards to do so, she can't help but feel flustered, being pressed this close to him.

She rests her head on the pillow, shyly meeting Mike's soft gaze. Their faces are only inches apart. As El studies his face, she can feel his warm breaths as they faintly brush against her skin.

"Hi," she whispers teasingly.

"Hi," Mike whispers back with a smile.

El falls silent, content with just enjoying the sight of him beside her. As she gazes at him, Mike wraps an arm around her back and starts playing with her hair. He runs his hands through it idly, almost mindlessly, and it takes everything within El to not melt on the spot. She'd give up anything to just spend the rest of eternity in this moment, snuggled beside Mike, his fingers nestled in her curls.

She gives off a contented sigh before she's able to stop herself. As she relishes in this moment, her vision starts to seem a little hazy. Nevertheless, she does her best to take in every last one of his features: his warm, chocolate-brown eyes, his ruffled dark hair, his pink, though still faintly bruised lips, and of course, his freckles.

The sky above them is glittering tapestry of stars, way more stars than what El's used to seeing in town. As she examines Mike's face more closely, she realizes that the freckles on his cheeks remind her of constellations.

She's definitely losing her mind.

"What are you thinking?" Mike murmurs, twisting a strand of her hair

around his pointer finger.

"Your freckles are like stars," El mumbles, not caring how insane she must sound.

Mike doesn't say anything, he only nods, but it seems like he gets what she means. Either that or he's just too nice to call her out on how weird she is.

The longer El gazes at him, the more she feels drawn to him. She wonders if it's possible for people to be made up of magic, even if they don't have superpowers. Mike has to be. The way he makes her feel is unlike anything she's ever experienced before. Surely, if his cheeks are dotted with constellations, then his insides must radiate with stardust.

She's getting pulled closer into his embrace, deeper into his orbit, and El realizes that she's tired of wasting time. Her eyes close as she carefully leans in and presses her lips to his cheek.

It almost feels like the first kiss she gave him, only this one is far better. The first time, he'd just laid in bed, lifeless and cold. Now, while still a little cold, El can hear his breath hitch in awed wonder and feel his eyelashes flutter against hers.

It's an intoxicating feeling, and El, feeling emboldened by his awestruck reaction, moves her lips down to press them against the corner of his mouth.

It's not a kiss, not quite — her lips land more against his jaw than anywhere else — but it's close. Very close. Close enough to make Mike's breath hitch in another faint gasp.

Maybe the gasps aren't a good thing though.

El pulls back to examine his face, suddenly worried that she might have overstepped her bounds. "I'm sorry," she murmurs, looking a little embarrassed.

"Don't be," Mike murmurs back, shaking his head ever-so-slightly. His eyes seem almost glazed over, like he's somewhere in between waking and dreaming. His fingers curl more tightly in her hair,

slowly pulling her closer to him.

El feels light-headed, but in the best of ways, like she's floating. Like the only sense of gravity she possesses is the force that's pulling her closer to Mike, slowly narrowing the gap between their parted lips. Just a couple centimeters closer, and—

"Oh my god," Dustin's voice grousing, "Are you guys making out?"

Mike and El jump apart as quickly and jerkily as is they'd both been hit with an electric shock. Since they're both still stuck inside the sleeping bag, they don't manage to get that far apart, and only wind up accidentally elbowing each other instead.

"DUSTIN?" Mike yelps, "You're awake?"

"No, Mike, I'm clearly asleep right now," Dustin replies dryly.

Oh, god. Dustin's awake and he's heard everything, including that El thinks Mike's freckles look like stars. She instantly wants nothing more than to jump off the edge of the Quarry.

"We weren't making out!" El blushingly insists. She's thankful it's dark out — at least Dustin can't see how humiliated she looks right now.

"You better not be," Max suddenly pipes up, "Because the first teenagers to get it on in a horror movie always die first."

"W-what!?" El stammers.

"MAX!?" Mike again yelps.

"*Mike*," Max mimics in a whiny voice, "I couldn't sleep over the sound of your mush-fest."

"How many people are awake!?" Mike demands, sounding mortified.

"Like, all of us," Lucas admits.

"Yup," Will concludes.

"You've all been listening this entire time!?" Mike exclaims, "And you

didn't say anything?!"

The rest of their friends all shuffle inside their sleeping bags as they make an indifferent sort of mumble.

"Oh my god," Mike mutters.

*Oh no, no, no.* This is officially the most embarrassing thing ever.

"Great," El mumbles, turning to bury her face in the pillow.

"You guys are pretty cute," Lucas snickers.

"And you guys are pretty much hypocrites!" Mike grumbles.

"How?!" Lucas counters.

"If this was a horror movie, El and I wouldn't be the first people to get killed off, it'd be you and Max!" Mike explains bitterly, "'Cause you guys totally made out on the kissing rock!"

As everyone falls silent, the sound of chirping crickets fills the air.

"Wait...you guys kissed?" Will asks.

"Um," Lucas hesitates.

"Fine!" Max snaps, "We did! It wasn't a big deal!"

"It wasn't?" Lucas asks worriedly.

"I mean," Max pauses, sounding flustered, "I guess it was."

"Oh my god," Dustin groans, "I mean, I'm like happy for all of you, but you guys seriously need to get a room, like, right now."

"A room? In the forest?" Will questions.

"Lucas and I aren't the ones being all weird! At least we understand the concept of privacy!" Max gripes, "Instead of trying to get to second base in front of literally everyone."

"We thought you were asleep!" El insists.

"We weren't trying to get to second base!" Mike adds.

"Because you were already there!" Max counters.

At this point, El knows that she wouldn't need to cuddle Mike for warmth, her entire body feels like it's been engulfed in flames. "Let's just go to sleep," she pleads, "Please."

"It's pretty late," Will agrees with a yawn, "We should try to get some rest."

"Fine by me," Max sighs, settling back down into her sleeping bag.

A beat of silence passes as everyone tries to settle down. Unsurprisingly, the silence doesn't last long.

"Wait, so are you and Lucas dating now?" Dustin asks Max.

"Dustin!" Everyone snaps.

"Jesus!" Dustin exclaims, "Sorry! I'll go to sleep!"

"Thank you!" Lucas sighs.

As everyone finally falls silent, El wonders if she should go back to her own sleeping bag. Maybe Mike is too embarrassed to do this anymore.

But to her surprise, Mike doesn't push her away. Instead, he draws her closer to him, gently tucking her head under his chin and wrapping his arms around her protectively.

Her ear is pressed against his chest, and as she cuddles Mike back, she listens closely to the steady, pounding rhythm of his heartbeat.

As embarrassing as that entire interaction with her friends was, a small part of El is relieved that they're not afraid to tease her. Even though they know that she still has powers, they're not treating her like some strange oddity, or someone to handle with rubber gloves.

To them, she's still just El, and as El drifts off to sleep in Mike's embrace, she realizes that that's the most comforting feeling of all.

## **14. My My Kind of Girl**

As it turns out, the boys' Homecoming video winds up airing on the news Saturday night. However, since most of the students are at the actual football game during this time, the only people who really see it are the boys' moms.

So much for becoming famous.

Throughout the Monday school day, Dustin tries to tell people about their video, but the general consensus seems to be that no one really gives a shit.

"This is a conspiracy!" Dustin insists later that day, "A plot to keep us from ever getting the recognition we deserve!"

In reality, Mike realizes, it's probably not a conspiracy, and more likely because everyone's minds are elsewhere. Not only is Halloween this week (Thursday), but so is the big Homecoming dance (Saturday).

There were several big Homecoming proposals scattered throughout the past couple weeks, but on Monday morning it kicks into overdrive with deliveries of gaudy flower bouquets, love songs played over boom boxes in the middle of the hallway, and declarations of ardor shouted while standing atop a cafeteria table.

The whole thing is a little overwhelming, mostly because Mike can't help but feel pressured. Throughout the entire day, he can barely make eye contact with El, he's so nervous. Is he supposed to do something crazy for her? His friends haven't really talked about whether or not they're going to the dance (other than Max griping that all this cheesiness made her want to slam her head into a wall, repeatedly).

By the time the school day ends, Mike is anxious for a way to distract himself from the daunting prospect of Homecoming. Thankfully, Will asks Mike to accompany him to the school's darkroom to help him develop some of the photos he'd taken over their weekend camping trip.

Mike is pretty sure that Will's only asking because he finds the darkroom a little creepy (to which Mike completely agrees — the pitch black classroom illuminated by a single red lightbulb feels like walking into the living definition of the word 'unsettling'), but regardless, Mike is eager to not only help his friend, but to also get a break from all the Homecoming hormones.

He watches in awe as Will expertly develops the photos. As creepy as the room is, it's admittedly fascinating to watch all of the pictures that Will took slowly emerge into existence.

By far, Mike's favorite photo is the group shot that Will's mom took of them before they left. Even though Mike isn't a big fan of getting his picture taken (like, ever), he has to admit that this one isn't that bad. His arm is around El, he's surrounded by his friends, and they just look so *happy*.

Will creates six prints of that photo, one for each member of their Party, he explains.

"Our Party?" Mike questions.

"Yeah," Will nods. He's finished making all the prints and is now carefully packing up all his supplies. "Like in D&D."

"I know *that*," Mike flushes, "But I never thought El and Max were in it."

"They are," Will says simply, handing Mike one of the group-photo prints.

As Mike smiles down at the photo, he knows that Will is completely right. "They are," he echoes before quickly adding, "Max would probably hate that, though."

"No, she'd only say that she hates it," Will replies, shaking his head, "Then secretly be happy about it. Like with Lucas."

Mike can't help but snort — Will's observation is so painfully true. He's still not sure if Max and Lucas are official, or anything, but by the way they held hands on the walk home after the camping trip, and the way Lucas hugged her goodbye and whispered into her ear,

and the way Max's eyes lit up when Lucas walked into school this morning...

In the eyes of their friends, they were a couple now. Just like how the girls were in their Party now. It didn't need to be vocalized, it was just felt and known.

"If El's our Mage," Mike ponders as he and Will exit the dark room,  
"Then what's Max?"

"I dunno," Will shrugs, rubbing his eyes as they adjust to the lighting change, "We'll have to let her choose."

It'd taken about an hour to develop the photos, so most students have already left school. Despite this, as Mike and Will walk through the deserted hallway, they can hear the distant sound of arguing voices. As the boys slowly continue down the corridor, the voices grow increasingly louder.

"What's that?" Will asks nervously.

"It sounds like it's coming from the gym," Mike replies, taking the lead. He guides the pair closer to the gym and, motioning for Will to stay close, carefully pushes the door open and peers past it.

Inside the gym, several girls are darting about, animatedly waving around rulers as they measure out the distances between various points around the gym.

The loudest of the voices seems to be coming from none other than Jennifer Hayes. "Oh my god! I told you guys that the South wall was 55 feet wide!" She laments, stomping her feet in frustration, "Not 50! Now we're not going to have enough balloons for the balloon arch!"

"It's just the Homecoming committee," Mike mutters, turning to glance back at Will, "It looks like they're just prepping for the dance."

Will, curiosity evidently getting the better of him, leans past Mike to look into the gym as well. That, as it turns out, is a fatal mistake, as the second Will ducks his head through the doorway is the same second Jennifer Hayes glances over her shoulder and spots them.

"Will!" She gasps excitedly.

"Oh no," Will whimpers.

Before Mike can ask Will what's wrong, Jennifer's already flipped her blonde ponytail over her shoulder and started sauntering over to them.

Mike and Will back up into the hallway, exchanging nervous glances.

Seconds later, Jennifer pushes open the gymnasium doors and joins them, smiling as perkily as ever. "There you are!" She beams, gaze locked on Will, "I've been looking for you!"

"Really?" Will asks worriedly.

"Yes!" Jennifer nods, "I want to ask you something!"

Even though Mike is still by Will's side, from the way Jennifer's gazing at Will, he basically doesn't exist. As Mike glances between the two, he starts to feel a little uneasy. After all, the last time Jennifer asked them something, El wound up passed out on the floor, there was a mass power outage, and Mike and his friends nearly suffered death by lamp.

"Okay?" Will replies, looking increasingly anxious.

"Well," Jennifer begins, flipping her ponytail again, "So, I know we didn't really get to talk much at my party, or afterwards—"

"—Because you got grounded?" Mike cuts in.

"—Yeah?" Jennifer falters, quickly throwing Mike a scowl, "But whatever. That's not the point. The point is that we never got to hang out, which like, totally sucked."

"I guess," Will mumbles.

"So," Jennifer continues, smiling again, "I was basically just like, wondering if you wanted to go to Homecoming with me?"

Mike's honestly surprised that neither he or Will keel over from

shock. Jennifer Hayes, who was literally the *most popular sophomore at Hawkins high*, just asked Will to Homecoming. Dustin's going to lose his shit once he finds out.

Even though their past experiences with Jennifer have been dicey at best, this is still an incredible development. Mike turns to smile excitedly at Will, but to his surprise, Will doesn't look thrilled. Quite the opposite, actually.

Will's swaying on the spot, his face is pale, and he's not really looking at anyone or anything in particular. "O-oh," he stammers.

"Will?" Jennifer asks concernedly, "Is everything okay?"

"I-I'm fine," Will insists, glancing at her.

"Great!" Jennifer smiles, "So you'll go with me?"

"I mean..." Will hesitates, "I...I...uh..."

Mike, completely taken aback why the entire situation, turns to look at Will. Why *wouldn't* Will say 'yes'? Sure, Jennifer could be a little... *intense* at times, but she's usually pretty nice. Plus, according to the opinion of most guys in their school, she's really pretty (not as pretty as El, obviously, but that's beside the point).

And yet, despite all this, Will only looks terrified. He turns to glance up at Mike anxiously, still swaying on the spot.

Even though Mike's not completely sure why, he knows that Will doesn't want to go to Homecoming with Jennifer.

"Will?" Jennifer asks again, looking confused.

"He can't!" Mike quickly cuts in, "He can't go with you to Homecoming!"

Jennifer eyes Mike. "And why not?"

"Because!" Mike replies, "He's...uh..."

"He's what?" Jennifer frowns, crossing her arms over her chest.

Will's eyes widen as he turns to glance frantically at Mike.

"He's already agreed to go with our friends!" Mike explains, "We all promised each other we'd go together as a group."

"...Oh," Jennifer pouts, shoulders slumping.

"Yeah," Mike nods, "We've been like, planning on this for months, so it's kind of a big deal."

Jennifer only nods, looking a little miffed, but nothing more.

"Sorry," Will mumbles, offering Jennifer a small apologetic smile.

"It's fine, I guess," Jennifer sighs, "Maybe I'll just ask like, Troy or something."

Mike and Will can't help but exchange judgmental glances as Jennifer pivots and saunters back into the gym.

"Good luck with that," Mike mutters as the door slams shut behind her.

Will smiles shakily. "Yeah," he mumbles, glancing down at his feet.

Mike turns to look at Will, brow furrowed in concern. "So, why didn't you want to go with her?"

Will shrugs, suddenly preoccupied with the strap of his camera bag.

"Do you not like her?"

Will hesitates. "It's not that I don't like her," he answers slowly, "I just..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm...I'm not sure that I really..."

As Will continues to stammer helplessly, Mike feels torn. On the one hand, he wants Will to tell him whatever's on his mind. On the other hand, if there's one thing Mike's learned from El, it's that it's not a great idea to pressure a confession out of someone.

"I d-don't think I..." Will continues to stammer, "I mean, I don't really want to..."

"It's okay," Mike finally laments, "You don't have to tell me, if you don't want to."

"Okay," Will mumbles. As he glances over at Mike, he physically looks relieved. His face gets less tense, he stops swaying in place, and he's able to manage a small, grateful smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Mike shrugs.

"It's just..." Will continues suddenly, "I'm not sure yet. I don't know if really...like...you know."

Mike isn't 100% sure if he knows exactly what Will's talking about, but he thinks he may have a faint idea. Either way, he's still not going to push Will to make a decision or confession that he might not be willing to make yet.

"That's ok," Mike assures Will, placing a hand on his shoulder. He's a little unsure of what to say, in all honesty, but just like with El, Mike wants Will to know that he would never judge one of his friends for being who they truly were.

Thankfully, Mike's simple assurance proves to be enough for Will, as he seems less anxious afterward.

The boys spend the rest of the walk to the bike rack in silence. When they head outside, Mike has to slip on the hood of his hoodie to keep his ears from getting too cold.

As Will boards his bike, he turns to glance back at Mike. "You should ask El to Homecoming," He suggests.

"What?!" Mike blusters.

"Well, we never really planned to go as a group," Will points out, "So, if you wanna go, you better ask her."

Even though Mike's been fantasizing about asking El to Homecoming for weeks now, when Will makes his suggestion, Mike finds himself

stupidly trying to think of excuses to not listen to it.

"Why would she even agree to go with me?" Mike asks thickly.

"Because she likes you!"

"She does?"

Will eyes him. "Of course. Did you not know?"

Mike hesitates. If he's going to be perfectly honest, he would have to admit that he didn't know. Like, he knows El likes him as a friend and everything, but a part of him is still a little paranoid that she's just being really nice.

Then again, 'just-being-nice' usually doesn't entail cuddling with someone and kissing them (twice). At least, he's pretty sure it doesn't.

As Mike thinks back to that moment, he starts to feel a little light headed. The whole thing had just felt so surreal — El, hovering inches away from him. El, pressing her lips to his cheek and jaw in a chaste touch that's burned into his sensory memory. Even if his friends had kind of totally ruined it, everything before that felt like a dream.

"I kind of thought you guys were already dating," Will continues, "I mean, you've kind of gone on dates already."

Mike scoffs. "No, we haven't—"

Then he pauses.

Asking her to Jennifer's party. Studying at the library together, not once, but twice. Watching cheesy soap operas at her house and eating waffles until they felt ready to explode.

Were those dates? Mike didn't think so, but maybe they were. The realization causes another question to dawn on him.

*Is he El's boyfriend?*

"You guys look at each other the same way Max and Lucas do," Will

says gently, "Only maybe even mushier."

Mike feels his cheeks flush red. "Really?"

Will nods. "Also, El really wants to go to Homecoming. She won't say it, because she's worried we'll tease her about it, but I can tell. We were talking about it on the walk back from camp and..."

"And?" Mike asks hopefully.

"And it'd make her really happy," Will finishes, "She deserves to be happy."

After all El's been through not only in the past month, but in her entire lifetime, Mike can't help but agree.

"I'll think about it," He assures Will.

"Good!" Will smiles. He turns his attention back to his bike and, as he begins to pedal away, he turns back one last time to wave goodbye to Mike. "See you tomorrow!"

Mike waves back before beginning his own trek home. As he walks, he keeps the photograph Will gave him in his grasp. He glances at it occasionally, mind heavy with the weight of the decision before him. Between what happened with Jennifer and Will, to the new development in Lucas and Max's relationship, and to the mounting pressure Mike feels within his relationship (if that's what it even is) with El, his head kind of hurts.

Thankfully, the long walk home does him good. As he walks past houses decorated with glowing jack-o'-lanterns and spooky lawn ornaments, the chilly evening air seems to clear his head.

He forces himself to, for once, not overanalyze everything. Instead, he focuses on what (who) he feels he really wants. As he looks down at the photo, at El smiling beside him, who that is becomes crystal clear.

By the time he reaches his house, he knows what he has to do.

He climbs the stairs two at a time and rushes into his bedroom. After

he kicks off his sneakers and shrugs off his backpack, he grabs his old walkie-talkie off his nightstand. Even though the boys mostly used their Supercoms to communicate when they were younger, Mike still prefers the privacy it offers as opposed to the family phone in the hallway.

*And, Mike thinks as he pulls up the antenna and turns the walkie-talkie on, he definitely needs privacy.* If his mom overheard him talking about asking a girl to Homecoming, he'd never hear the end of it.

As the walkie-talkie crackles to life, the white-noise roar of radio static fills Mike's bedroom. He fiddled with the dials, tuning in to the right channel and causing the roar to die down to a steady hum.

"Hello?" Mike calls out, taking a seat on the bottom bunk of his bed, "Does anyone copy? This is Mike, over."

As he waits for a response, Mike drums his leg against the floor. They had to be home by now, it was nearly 5:00.

A minute passes.

Mike is just about to repeat his message when his friends' voices finally crackle over speaker.

"10-4, Mike, this is Dustin," Dustin announces.

"I'm here too," Lucas chimes in.

"Me too!" Will adds.

"Great!" Mike smiles, relaxing back on his bed, "I need to talk to you guys."

"If this is another plan to sell our test answers," Lucas says dryly, "The answer is no."

"It's not that!" Mike huffs, rolling his eyes.

"Then what the hell is going on?" Dustin asks.

Mike hesitates, trying to keep his voice as casual as possible as he

suggests, "I think we should go to Homecoming."

"Aww, Mike!" Dustin gushes, "I never thought you'd ask me! I'm touched, really."

"Oh my god, Dustin," Mike scowls, "You know what I mean. Like, all of us should go as a group. I think it'd be fun."

"That's what you said about Jennifer's party," Lucas points out, "And that was like, the exact opposite of fun."

"I know," Mike admits, "But this is different. This is going to be at school, so there'll be teachers around to supervise everyone. Plus, now that we know about El's powers, we can protect her if anything happens."

"And keep her away from the punch," Dustin adds dryly.

"You have a point," Lucas admits to Mike.

"I think we should go," Will agrees, "We didn't last year, so we don't really know what we're missing out on."

"Exactly," Mike nods. Even though Mike already knows that Will is on his side in this, it's still nice to have his vocal support. Hopefully it'll be easier to get Dustin and Lucas to agree if both Mike and Will want to.

A beat of uninterrupted radio static passes as Lucas and Dustin consider this. And then—

"I guess we should," Lucas eventually relents.

"I mean, is it even really a choice?" Dustin teases, "You have a girlfriend now, Lucas, so you basically *have* to go."

Lucas replies with an indignant little scoff that's nearly lost amongst the radio static. "I don't even know how I'd ask her!" He confesses, "She doesn't really seem like the 'dance' type."

"Yeah, that's another thing," Mike continues sheepishly, "I don't really know how to ask El, either."

At that statement, Dustin and Lucas hoot and holler both excitedly and teasingly.

"So, Mike!" Lucas croons, "You're finally gonna admit that you're into El?"

"Everyone knows that Mike is into El!" Dustin snickers, "It's been obvious since the day he met her!"

"Technically, he met her in 6th grade," Will points out.

"Well, in detention, then," Dustin amends.

"You guys are so annoying," Mike groans, cheeks flushing pink, "Why does it even matter? Lucas literally just admitted that Max is his girlfriend."

"Yeah, but we all knew that," Dustin explains, "And, like you said, Lucas admitted it. You and El are still in complete denial about the fact that you're basically dating already."

"Because we're not dating!" Mike insists.

"Exhibit A," Dustin sighs.

"Well, whatever," Mike dismisses, cheeks still warm, "I just wanted some advice on how to ask her, okay?"

"We can help you!" Will offers graciously, "At least, we can try."

"I promised you that I'd be your wingman for Jennifer's party," Dustin reminds Mike, "And that offer totally still stands."

"I'm pretty sure you'd make things worse," Lucas remarks.

"I would not!" Dustin defends.

"You could make El a mixtape," Will suggests, cutting off Dustin and Lucas before their bickering can escalate any further, "You could put a bunch of songs on it about going to a dance, and then write 'Homecoming,' on the label."

"That could work," Mike hesitates, "Except I don't know that many songs."

Even though Mike continued listening to El's favorite bands in his free time, he still doesn't feel confident enough to pick out enough songs that fit both the right message and El's musical taste. Knowing his luck, he'd probably fill the tape with a bunch of songs that she didn't even like.

"I know!" Lucas pipes up, "You could take her to Benny's, and like, buy her some waffles."

"I don't have a bike though," Mike reminds him, "So I'd have to walk there." Not only that, but Mike's last big display of affection included waffles, and while he's sure that El wouldn't mind, he doesn't want to seem so repetitive. He has a feeling that his friends will only tease him further if he tells them about his Eggos apology, and consequently decides to keep that last bit of information to himself.

"I got it!" Dustin exclaims, sounding excited.

"What?" Mike asks warily.

"Oh, it's perfect," Dustin enthuses gleefully, "It's so perfect."

"What is it?!"

Dustin takes a deep breath before he proceeds to fill Mike in on every detail of his proposed plan. As he talks, Mike can practically envision him grinning and waving his hands excitedly.

"So, what do you think?" Dustin asks once he's finished.

Though Mike was slightly hesitant toward the idea of any Homecoming-proposal of Dustin's, he has to admit that Dustin's suggestion is the best of all. While not extravagant, it's simple, sentimental, and brings things back full circle. Plus, it'll hopefully save him from having to do a lot of talking, which never really seems to go well when he's around El.

"It's perfect," Mike beams, "Like, completely perfect."

"See?" Dustin replies confidently, "Wingman."

---

El's lying in bed, looking through the polaroids she took last weekend when the phone on her nightstand rings.

Puzzled as to who would be calling her at this hour (it's almost 11:00!), she reaches over and picks up the receiver and brings it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hey, El!" Max greets.

"Max?" El smiles, crinkling her brow, "What's going on?"

"Oh, you know," Max replies nonchalantly, "Nothing really."

She's obviously lying. Mainly because Max wouldn't call her this late for no reason, and secondly because Max's voice is a little higher-pitched than usual, which either means she's mimicking El or hiding something.

"I know it's not nothing," El replies.

"It is!" Max insists.

"Max," El says, exasperated, "Just tell me."

Max gives a heavy, elongated sigh. "*Fine*," she finally huffs, "But...don't laugh, okay?"

El gasps eagerly. "Is this about Lucas?"

"No! Well...I mean...kind of."

Another gasp. "Tell me!"

Max takes a breath before quickly blurting out, "Iwanuhgotoshimkimmimg."

El frowns. "What?"

"I wanna go to Homecoming!" Max repeats, sounding embarrassed.

El grins. She knows she probably shouldn't, but she can't help but tease Max in response (plus, in El's defense, Max has teased her a million more times than El has teased Max). She thinks back to the last time they'd talked about Homecoming, at that Friday night sleepover that now seemed like it was years ago.

"Homecoming?" El echoes, "You mean the dance?"

"Obviously."

"The dance that they've put up ten million posters for all over school?"

"Yeah."

"The one this weekend?"

"Yes."

"The dance that only dweebs go to?"

"El!" Max huffs, half indignant, half amused, "Don't use my words against me!"

"I'm sorry!" El giggles.

"You're evil," Max gripes.

El only giggles even more at this. She probably sounds totally, giddily dumb, but she can't help herself. She's secretly always wanted to go to the dance, but the deck always seemed stacked against her. Max thought it was lame, Mike didn't even know that El existed...

But now, neither of those are true.

Well, sort of.

Mike has kinda been avoiding El all day. She tried not to notice it, but she couldn't help it. He'd barely made eye contact with her, he didn't walk her to class, and he'd kept the conversation curt during Biology.

She's not sure what's going on. Maybe he's just having a bad day. She shouldn't worry about it...

...Right?

"I know it's lame," Max continues, "But—"

"It's not!" El negates, shaking her head, "We should go! Did Lucas ask you?"

"No," Max admits, sounding a little annoyed.

"Oh," El pouts.

"That's why *I'm* going to ask him," Max continues confidently.

"Oh!" El gasps in surprise.

"Do you think that's dumb?" Max asks worriedly.

"No!" El adamantly insists, "It's perfect!"

"Really?" Max brightens.

"Yes!"

"Okay, great, because I kind of already have a plan to ask him."

*Of course she does.*

"What is it?" El asks curiously.

Max tells her, voice laden with an odd mixture of both embarrassment and excitement. When she finishes though, El can definitely tell that Max is feeling more of the latter.

"I think it's perfect!" El smiles after Max concludes.

"Me too!" Max agrees, "He's gonna lose his shit probably, but it'll be worth it."

"Just be careful," El advises, "You don't want to get in trouble."

"That's what I'm worried about," Max confesses, "Do you think you can help me?"

"Help you?"

"I don't want to do it alone," Max explains.

El only needs to consider the proposition for a few seconds before she agrees. After all that Max's done to help her and Mike, it's the least she can do in return. "I'll help you," El nods.

"Then let's go!"

"Right now?!" El balks.

"Yeah! We only got 'till the end of the week, and I wanna make sure no one else asks him before then!"

"Who else would ask him?" El asks, trying not to snort.

"No one, because I'm going to first," Max states firmly, "And if anyone else tries to, I'll like...kick them."

"Max!"

"I'm kidding!" Max swears, "...Mostly."

El holds back a laugh. "I'll meet you there," she assures Max.

"Thanks, El! I owe you!"

El wishes her goodbye before hanging up the phone and rushing over to her closet. She slips on a black hoodie, layers her favorite leather jacket over it, and grabs her skateboard. Slipping the hood over her head, she tiptoes to the window and carefully uses her powers to open it.

If her dad finds out she's sneaking out, she'll be grounded for longer than Jennifer Hayes was.

*Doesn't matter,* El reminds herself as she crawls out the window and uses her powers to lower herself to the ground, *Her friend needs her.*

It takes about 20 minutes to skate to school. When she arrives, Max is already waiting for her, wearing her backpack and her favorite gray hoodie. She's standing at the very front of the school, beside the bike rack and the brick wall with the giant tiger logo on it.

"There you are!" She whispers, as El comes to a stop, "I was getting worried."

"Sorry!" El apologizes, "My house is so far away."

"It really is," Max nods. With that, she slips her backpack off, unzips the main compartment, and flips the entire thing upside down.

Numerous cans of spray paint fall to the ground with a loud clatter that echoes off into the empty parking lot.

"Shit," Max winces, "That was louder than I expected."

El snorts and smiles wryly. "So, what do you want it to look like?"

"Whatever," Max shrugs, bending over to pick up a can, "I'm thinking I'll just write out the words, and we can add like, geeky stuff around them."

"Good idea!" El nods enthusiastically.

"Then let's do it!" Max grins. She tosses El a can of spray paint before giving her own can a rattling shake.

There's an empty stretch of brick wall next to the tiger logo, and the girls use it as their canvas. As they get to work, their progress is soundtracked with muffled giggles and the familiar hiss of spraying paint. The tingling metallic fumes from the paint fill their noses as they go through can after can, working quickly and efficiently.

"I'm going to add one heart," El whispers, "Or maybe ten."

"Don't you dare!" Max gasps, nudging her.

El doesn't. She does add several more stars though.

By the time they're done, El's nails are speckled with colors and her

fingers hurt from pressing down on the caps of the cans for so long.

But, as El and Max step back to admire their handiwork, El knows that it's totally worth it.

The wall is adorned with spray-painted doodles of stars, *Dig-Dug* icons, and Darth Vader's helmet. In the center of it all, in Max's sloppy handwriting, is scrawled a message, simple and to the point.

*L.S., Homecoming. M.M.*

It's not eloquent, but El can't picture Max doing it any other way, vandalism and all.

"Nice work, Hopper," Max beams, turning to nod proudly at El.

"You too, Mayfield," El nods back, just as proud.

They exchange high-fives, pick up the empty spray cans, and hurry to the back of the school to dispose of them in the dumpster. With a final goodbye hug, they part ways, each skateboarding back home, vanishing into the night, faces glowing with excitement.

---

According to the rumors that spread on Tuesday, Lucas Sinclair basically has a mental breakdown in the school parking lot before classes start. But, unlike the last time a similar situation involving spray paint and Greg McCorkle happened, when Lucas reportedly 'squeals like a girl,' it's not out of enraged fury, but rather shocked happiness.

Also unlike the last time: the culprit actually gets caught. After seeing the initialed signature, it doesn't take long for Mr. Coleman to track down Max Mayfield and punish her with yet another detention.

Evidently, that detention is comprised of Max having to scrub every last speck of spray paint off the brick wall after school. According to the gossip exchanged between fellow students, Lucas finds her doing this, helps her clean it off, and almost gets a detention for an 'overly enthusiastic public display of affection' afterward.

Or, as Dustin Henderson reportedly puts it, "They like, totally made

out. It was disgusting."

---

On Halloween night, while most of the kids in their school are at Greg McCorkle's big house party, El and her friends decide to go over to Mike's house to watch scary movies instead. As Max points out, since the boys 'forced her to sit through Star Wars,' it's only fair that she gets a turn to pick out the movie they watch.

The boys agree (to varying levels of enthusiasm), which is how El finds herself back in Mike's basement, casually snuggled beside him, and munching away on what's more than likely an unhealthy amount of candy. Mrs. Wheeler has provided them with plenty of snacks and candy bags for their movie night, and consequently everyone's a little extra jittery from all the sugar.

They're sitting in the same order that they did while watching Star Wars: Mike and El on the couch, Dustin and Will on their own recliners, and Max and Lucas on the floor. Only this time, instead of Max making snarky comments, it's Dustin.

"If someone gets murdered at a summer camp," Dustin states, unwrapping a Reese's Peanut Butter cup, "That camp needs to be shut down forever. I don't care how long it's been; only an idiot would reopen it."

"Agreed," Max nods, not taking her eyes off the screen.

"Did you two just agree on something?" Will teases.

Dustin and Max exchange annoyed grimaces. "No!" They both insist.

El smiles and turns to roll her eyes at Mike, but for once, he's not looking back at her. Instead, he's sitting stiffly and his face looks a little anxious. He's drumming his leg against the floor, something El knows he does when he's impatient or nervous.

"Hey," El murmurs, nudging him gently, "Are you ok?"

Mike flinches and turns to look at her, wide-eyed. "What?"

"Are you ok?" El repeats, smiling gently.

"Oh!" Mike blushes, "Uh, yeah, I'm fine."

He's totally not, El can tell. He looks all jumpy and freaked out, and he's hardly touched the ghost-shaped sugar cookies that Mrs. Wheeler made for them (the same cookies that El now knows are Mike's annual favorite, as Mrs. Wheeler had earlier revealed, much to Mike's embarrassment and El's delight).

"Are you scared?" El asks concernedly.

"S-scared?" Mike stammers.

"Of the movie?"

"Oh," Mike pauses, turning to glance at the screen, "No."

"You're totally scared, Mike," Dustin teases, "You're shaking like crazy."

"Am not!" Mike frowns, stilling the foot that was drumming against the floor.

"What's wrong with being scared?" Will questions. He has his sketchbook open on his lap, but instead of drawing anything, he's using it as a flat surface to sort his M&M's into color-coordinated piles.

"Because it's just a movie!" Max shrugs, digging through the bowl of Red Vines she's keeping between her and Lucas.

"Well, we never watch scary movies," Will admits, adjusting his pile of red M&M's, "So we're not really used to it."

"What do you nerds do on Halloween, then?" Max frowns, confused.

"We usually went trick-or-treating," Dustin shrugs, "But now we're apparently 'too old' for that."

"One time in 8th grade, we dressed up as the Ghostbusters to school!" Will offers.

Max's eyes widen as she gasps excitedly. "I remember that!" She nods,

"Everyone was talking about what huge nerds you guys were."

"Yeah, we know," Lucas acknowledges flatly.

Max shakes her head as she grins at Lucas. "So, you were basically born nerds, right? I mean, you guys are like this big geek family. I think it's genetic!"

"Yup," Dustin nods, "And you're marrying into it."

As their friends continue to banter back and forth, El can't help but worry about Mike. He still looks so *nervous*, though El has no idea why. Even though she's pressed up against his side, he hasn't tried to cuddle her once, or even play with her hair, which she'd specifically worn loose for the sole hope that he'd run his hands through her curls while they watched movies. The hairstyle change had gotten her several odd looks at school earlier that day, but El could honestly care less.

Things have still been just as tense as they were Monday. Everything was different ever since they shared a sleeping bag Saturday night. Mike's barely been able to make direct eye contact with her, he avoided her in the hallways, and he continued to deflect any attempts at conversation.

His sudden shyness doesn't make any sense, and it's a little hurtful, if El's going to be honest. She thought that they were making progress in their relationship.

Part of El wonders if it has anything to do with Homecoming. They haven't talked about it, or anything, but El can't stop herself from secretly hoping that he'll ask her.

She considered asking him like Max asked Lucas, but at the same time, she feels far too worried to actually go through with it. After all, it feels like Mike's backtracking big time. Maybe the kisses she'd given him had been too much too soon. Maybe this is his way of showing that he's not interested anymore, that he's changed his mind.

El glances over at Mike, but he's still not looking back at her. His eyes are clouded over, as if he's deeply lost in his own thoughts.

El frowns. As her heart sinks lower in her chest, she carefully inches away from him, leaving a noticeable space between them.

Coincidentally, just as a storm approaches the summer camp in the movie they're watching, a distant roll of thunder rumbles throughout Hawkins. Moments later, the basement is filled with the sound of rushing wind and drumming rain.

"Sweet!" Max grins, glancing at the ceiling, "It's storming, just like in the movie!"

"How is that a good thing?!" Dustin yelps, "Why do you *want* our lives to be like a horror movie?"

"Because then you'd be killed off," Max smirks.

"I think Mike made it clear that you and Lucas would be killed off first," Dustin snorts, "Right, Mike?"

Mike blinks and looks around nervously, as if he's suddenly just awoken from a haze. "What?"

"El, I think your boyfriend is malfunctioning," Max snorts.

"He's not," El mumbles, wrapping her arms around herself. She's not quite sure whether she's denouncing that Mike's her boyfriend or whether he's acting weird. Either way, the rest of their movie night passes with a tangibly awkward tension between Mike and El. El finds herself so worried over it, she doesn't even react to all the gore and carnage in the movie (well, for the most part — she still cringes when the killer gets decapitated at the end).

When the movie's finished, it's verging on 10:30. Mrs. Wheeler comes down into the basement to remind them that while she 'loves having you girls here,' it is a School Night and that they all really should be In Bed.

It's still pouring rain outside, now even more so than ever before. As El and her friends walk up the basement stairs, the sound of booming thunder and crackling lightning grows only louder.

Not really wanting to skateboard or bike home in the pouring rain,

everyone uses the Wheeler's phone to call their parents for a ride. As they wait for their rides, they all lounge around in Mike's living room, chatting idly.

Time passes. One by one, cars pull into the driveway, and one by one, another member of their group wishes everyone goodbye. First Will, then Dustin, then Lucas, then Max, and before long, only El and Mike are left.

Under any other circumstances, this would be an amazing turn of events. Unfortunately, the current circumstances mean that Mike and El are left sitting on his couch, silently glancing at the other and listening to the clamor of the thunderstorm.

El picks at her blue bracelet, hoping that Hopper will get here soon. Either that, or that Mike will finally say something.

She gets the latter.

"I need to talk to you!" Mike blurts out unexpectedly.

El glances at him, surprised. "What?"

"I wanna talk," Mike reiterates, looking a little nervous.

*Finally.*

"Okay," El replies evenly, "Talk."

"So," I know I've been acting weird—" Mike begins.

*That's an understatement.*

"—But that's only because...it's because there's something I wanna do."

El doesn't want to feel hopeful, but she can't stop herself. Her heart skips a beat as she meets his gaze. "What?" She asks curiously.

"Well," Mike smiles shakily, "I'm not really sure how to do it. That's what I've kinda been thinking about all night."

*Oh, god. Oh, yes. This is happening.*

El smiles. "Go ahead!" She encourages, sliding a little closer to him.

Mike nods, ducks his head, digs into his pocket, and retrieves an object. He doesn't show it to her at first, instead keeping it hidden between his palms.

*This is it, El thinks, holding her breath, He's going to ask me to Homecoming.*

"I wanted you to have this," Mike says, holding out his hand to her.

El braces herself. *Is it a ring? What if it's a ring? No, it couldn't be. They aren't even dating and this isn't a movie and if he's actually giving her a ring that'd be a little weird.*

Though her heart starts hammering in her chest, El pushes aside her frantic thoughts and wills herself to look down. In Mike's outstretched hand lies—

"Your Rubik's cube?" El says, voice sinking with confusion.

"Uh, yeah!" Mike smiles shakily, "I wanted you to have it."

"That's...that's it?" El asks warily.

Mike shrugs. "I mean, kinda, yeah."

El swallows. She doesn't want to seem petty, or anything, but she can't help but feel a little disappointed. And frustrated. Very frustrated. All week, she's been wasting time just sitting around and waiting for Mike to ask her to the dance. She thought that he liked her! He'd cuddled her, and they'd almost kissed! Why would he do that stuff if he didn't like her? And if he liked her, why wouldn't he ask her to the dance? Why would he just act so *weird*?

"Thanks," El mumbles, taking the Rubik's cube out of his hand. It's all mixed up and covered in black scribbles and scuffs, and as El slips it into her pocket of her hoodie, she can't help but feel like he's only giving it to her because it obviously got ruined somehow. Great.

"Do you wanna solve it?" Mike offers, raising his wrist and pointing to his watch, "I can time you!"

*Seriously?* El's seated right beside him, the dance is less than 2 days away, and all Mike can think about is his *Rubik's cube*?

"I don't really want to," El mutters, averting her gaze.

"Why not?" Mike frowns.

El hesitates. "I'm tired."

It's not a lie, not really. She *is* tired. Tired of all this confusing back-and-forth with Mike. They hold hands, and then they don't. They cuddle, and then Mike can barely meet her gaze. It's all so confusing and she just wishes she knew what she was doing *wrong*.

"Are you sure?" Mike asks, looking anxious, "I really think you should —"

Thankfully, Mike's cut off by the sound of a car horn. El turns to look out the window and sees that her dad's cruiser is waiting in the driveway.

"I gotta go," El says, thankful for the interruption. As much as she loves Mike, she's just feeling so hurt and upset with him, she doesn't think she can stand to face him a moment longer. She rises to her feet, slipping the hood of her hoodie over her wily curls.

Mike glances out the window and catches sight of her dad. "Oh," he mumbles, face falling.

"I'll see you tomorrow," El mumbles back. She steps into the foyer, grabbing her skateboard from where she'd left it propped against the wall.

Mike only nods as he watches her leave, still looking a little upset. "Okay," he pouts, and even though El's frustrated with him, she can't help but note how cute he looks right now, even though he's sad.

*Damn it.*

*It's not fair, really,* El thinks as she leaves through the front door and dashes out into the pouring rain. She shouldn't think that Mike is cute, not when he's being so irritating.

And yet, as she climbs into her dad's cruiser, soaked to the bone, she finds herself already missing him. She hasn't even left his driveway yet.

"Hey, kid," Hopper greets.

"Hey," El replies stiffly, buckling herself into her seat.

Hopper backs the car out of the driveway and commences the long drive home. He manages to go a full 2 minutes before asking about Mike, which has to be a new record for him.

"So, how was Mike's?" He asks casually (curiously).

*Confusing. Complicated.*

"Fine," El mumbles, shivering slightly. Though her dad has the heat blowing through the car vents, the pouring rain has left her feeling icy all over. Her hoodie sticks to her back and her socks make a heavy *squelch* sound as she shuffles her feet.

"Just fine?" Hopper asks, eyeing her.

El chews on her lower lip. Honestly, the more she thinks about Mike, the more irritated she gets. She just wants things to be simple between them, like with Max and Lucas. At least Lucas never pretends like he didn't like Max — he practically drools over her on a daily basis.

"Not fine," El mutters, eyes narrowing a little.

Hopper glances at her with a frown. "Did something happen?"

"No!" El bursts suddenly, frustrating boiling, bursting, "Nothing happened! Nothing ever happens!"

"Okay!" Hopper exclaims, startled, "Jesus, kid. Just...slow down. Tell me what happened."

She knows she's being irrational and over-emotional. She also knows that complaining about Mike to her dad might not be the best idea, but she just needs to *vent* to somebody, and Hopper is her only option right now.

"I thought he was going to ask me to Homecoming!" El snaps, "But he didn't! He's so confusing and I don't understand!"

"Maybe he's just nervous," Hopper offers tentatively, "Maybe he's just working up the courage."

El snorts dismissively.

"There's still time," Hopper reminds her, "The dance is—"

"—The day after tomorrow," El seethes.

"Oh."

"Yeah," El replies, hating how her voice cracks near the end, "He's not going to ask me. I thought he was tonight, but all he did was give me this!"

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the Rubik's cube, presenting it to her dad. Hopper glances back and forth between the cube and the road a few times before cautiously reaching out to grab it.

"What's this?" He frowns, continuing to glance at it as he drives.

"*It's ruined,*" El pouts, not quite sure if she's just talking about the Rubik's cube anymore. "He scribbled all over it and it's all mixed up and—"

Her voice breaks as she slumps back in her seat. Rain continues to pummel against the car from all sides, and El suddenly just feels so exhausted from her impatience and disappointment.

Hopper turns the cube over a few times in his hand, using his other hand to keep the wheel steady. "I don't think these are scribbles, kid," he remarks several moments later.

El frowns. "What?"

"Look," Hopper instructs, tossing the cube back to her, "There's letters."

El's brow furrows even further as she peers at the Rubik's cube more closely. Sure enough, etched on one of the white squares in Sharpie marker is a single word.

*Forever.*

El's breath hitches as her mind starts racing to come up with an explanation. She flashes back to Mike's living room, to the nervous, hopeful smile he'd given her as he passed her the Rubik's cube.

*Do you wanna solve it?*

*I really think you should—*

Oh, god.

Her heart starts pounding as she immediately begins shuffling the cube. Even though her hands are shaking, she works at lightning speed.

"White cross," she mutters under her breath, moving the cube accordingly, "Sides still match."

"Huh?" Hopper questions, sounding lost.

El doesn't respond. With the amount of sheer and undivided attention she's dedicated to solving the Rubik's cube, she's pretty sure that the world could be ending around her and she wouldn't notice.

She counts off the seconds in her head, and solves it in record time. 3 minutes, 53 seconds.

Her heart stops as she examines her completed work. As she does so, every other sensory detail fades away. She doesn't hear the pouring rain, the howling wind, or the rhythmic squeak of the windshield wipers frantically trying to keep up with it all. She doesn't feel her wet socks or her damp hoodie. She doesn't smell the scent of coffee and cigarettes that's permanently embedded into the seats of this car.

She sees. She sees every last, nonsensical, completely sentimental thing that Mike's scribbled onto the Rubik's cube in Sharpie. The frog smiley face. The doodles of waffles. The music notes. The lightsabers. The Ramones lyrics.

*You are my kind of a girl, I think we would look pretty good together, dancing through the school gymnasium, and this time I think it is forever.*

Scrambled up, it hadn't made any sense, but now, pieced together—

*Oh god, she's been such a knucklehead,* El realizes, *a huge, overreacting, dramatic, wasteoid.* She really needs to stop watching so many soap operas.

He edited the lyrics for her. He took the time listening to songs for her, and solving the Rubik's cube for her, and drawing everything for her, and *he's so impossibly considerate* — El doesn't know what she ever did to deserve him.

She finds herself crying, for some nonsensical, intangible reason. Mainly because she's happy. Ridiculously happy. It's so ridiculous that even when she bursts out laughing, her giggles bubble forth as nothing more than choked-up sobs.

---

As Mike lies back in bed, he contemplates why his life is so terrible all of the time. It's probably because of his own stupidity, honestly.

After Dustin suggested that Mike use his Rubik's cube to ask El to Homecoming, since they were so 'weirdly obsessed with it,' Mike spent the rest of the week working on it.

It took him all of Tuesday to solve the Rubik's cube, since he'd never managed to finish it at the arcade. He spent all of Wednesday listening to all of El's favorite bands, trying to find the perfect lyrics. In between classes earlier today, not feeling quite satisfied (and partly inspired by Max), he doodled everything else that he could think of.

It wasn't until El showed up at his doorstep tonight to watch movies that he realized he had no plan on how to actually present the

Rubik's cube to her. Not only that, but he'd been so focused on crafting his plan, he'd accidentally isolated El in the process.

He could tell by the despondent way she kept glancing at him throughout the night. He'd taken too long, he'd disappointed her, and then the pressure to make sure that everything was perfect, that *he* was perfect, was higher than ever.

By the time he'd finally summoned the courage, it was too late, and once again, El was gone. He'd missed his window, all because he was too scared and he overanalyzed everything, like he always did.

*Why does he always have to be such a colossal idiot?*

Mike groans as he rolls over to bury his face in his pillow. The storm has stopped outside, and yet Mike still feels like he's trapped in the horror movie they watched.

He has to try again. He has to think of another plan. The first one was an obvious failure, not that it was really any good to begin with. Max basically had the same idea as him, so even if El did solve it, she'd probably think it was stupid and unoriginal.

His self-pitying contemplation is interrupted by the sound of his bedroom door creaking open.

"Michael?" His mother calls out, ducking her head through the doorway, "Are you awake?" Her voice sounds all sing-songy and eager, like she's super happy about something.

"Yeah," Mike mumbles into his pillow, "Why."

"You have a phone call!" Mrs. Wheeler replies, practically squealing from excitement, "It's El!"

Mike snaps upright so fast, he's genuinely surprised that he doesn't break his spine in the process. "El?" He echoes disbelievingly.

"Mmm hmm!" Mrs. Wheeler nods, beaming from ear-to-ear, "She really wants to talk to you!"

Mike doesn't need to hear anything more. Within seconds, he's

already leapt out of bed, darted out of his room, and made it halfway down the hallway. He descends the stairs two at a time, heart pounding so hard it feels like it might just beat right out of his chest.

He skids to a stop in front of the family phone and picks up the receiver, feeling a little winded.

"Hello?" He asks breathlessly, trying not to pant into the phone.

"Mike?" El asks shyly.

"El!" Mike smiles, slumping back against the wall in relief, "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's okay," El says carefully, "I just..."

Mrs. Wheeler comes to join Mike in the hallway, not even attempting to be subtle with her eavesdropping. Mike motions for her to go away, but she only smiles and shakes her head.

*Go on*, she mouths, motioning for him to continue.

His mom seriously has to be the most embarrassing mom in the world.

"I solved the Rubik's cube," El continues.

If there's anything that could be said to get Mike's mind off his eavesdropping mother, it's that.

"Y-you did?!" Mike stammers.

"Yes," El replies. Though her voice seems shy, it's also surprisingly steady, so Mike can't really tell what she's feeling, "I beat my record."

"And?" Mike asks anxiously.

"And...and I'm sorry."

Mike pales. "Sorry?"

"Yes! I'm so sorry," El apologizes profusely, "I was stupid. I made assumptions, again."

"Wait, what?! No!" Mike rejects, "You're not stupid! You're never stupid! *I'm* the one who's sorry. You wouldn't have had to make assumptions if I hadn't acted like a total wasteoid. I shouldn't have acted so weird. I was just so nervous, you know?"

"Nervous? Why?"

"I dunno," Mike frowns, "I guess...I guess I just wanted everything to be perfect. I was so worried that you were going to say no."

"You worry too much," El chides him gently.

"I know," Mike admits.

"It's cute," El continues, "...Sometimes. Other times, it's annoying."

"I'm sorry," Mike mumbles, shuffling his feet in place, "I know I can be an idiot."

"You can," El says bluntly, and Mike has to stop himself from laughing at her sheer brazeness.

"Jeez, El," he blushes, rubbing the back of his neck.

"It's true!" El points out dejectedly, "I told you I was sorry for ignoring you when I was scared. Then you did the same to me."

He can hear the hurt in her voice, and it kills him. "You're right," he admits, "I shouldn't have done that."

El is silent for several moments as she broods over his response. "Promise me," she finally says, voice firm.

"Promise you?" Mike echoes, "What?"

"That we won't shut each other out, ever," El explains, "No lying. No ignoring."

It's an offer Mike is more than willing to accept. "I promise," he assures her, clutching the phone receiver tightly, "I'll never do that again."

"I promise too," El vows.

"Okay," Mike nods, breathing out a small sigh of relief, "That's, uh, good."

El makes a small hum of agreement, and then a beat of silence passes between them. Hoping to keep the conversation from faltering for too long, Mike again rushes to make sure that El knows just how sorry he is.

"I just still feel so bad," He confesses, "About making you feel bad."

"Well," El pauses, then tentatively replies, "You should make it up to me, then."

"How?" Mike pleads, "I'll do like, anything, I swear."

El sighs indifferently. (Or is it coyly? It's hard for Mike to tell over the phone.) "Maybe you could..."

"Yeah?" Mike responds hopefully.

"...Take me to Homecoming?"

*She still wants to go?! With HIM?*

Mike can hardly believe his luck. Even though he doesn't know what he did to deserve someone as amazing as El, he does know that having her in his life is something he'll be eternally grateful for.

Mike feels his cheeks flush red as he breaks into a wide grin. "Uh, yeah!" He beams, "I think I can definitely do that."

"Good!" El replies with a small, contented giggle.

"So, it's a date?" Mike asks, instantly wincing at his word choice. A date? Really? Was that too much?

But, to his relief, El doesn't audibly cringe in response. Instead, she gives another light, excited laugh, and replies simply, "Yes. It is."

Mike feels like he's about to burst, he's so excited. Okay, so maybe his

life isn't so terrible all the time. After all, how could it be when he'd just secured a date with literally the most amazing girl in the entire universe? A girl who also had actual *superpowers*?

"I guess," El continues, "I'll see you at school tomorrow?"

"Definitely!" Mike smiles, "See you then!"

"Bye, Mike!"

"Bye, El!"

"Goodnight!"

"Night!"

"Night!"

"Night, El!"

"Night, Mike!"

They're talking in circles, neither wanting to hang up first. But then Mike glances over and sees that his mom is still smiling all excitedly at him, and he's abruptly reminded that his mom has already overheard way too much.

"Okay, bye," Mike says definitively.

"Bye!" El replies wistfully.

Mike hangs up the phone.

"Well?" Mrs. Wheeler asks expectantly.

"We're going to Homecoming," Mike huffs with an eye roll, and even though he's trying to make it seem like it's not that big of a deal, he can't stop himself from grinning.

Mrs. Wheeler lets out an excited squeal (again, most embarrassing mom ever), and brings a hand to cover her mouth, as if she's about to cry, or something. "You have a date!" She simpers, getting all teary-eyed, "To *Homecoming!* With a girl!"

"You don't gotta sound *so* surprised," Mike grumbles.

"I know, I know," His mother continues, "It's just...you're so grown up! You're becoming a *man!*"

"What?!" Mike exclaims, scrunching up his nose.

"Oh, just wait until I tell Nancy!" Mrs. Wheeler continues, "She'll be so excited for you!"

"No!" Mike yelps, "Don't tell Nancy!" If Nancy finds out that Mike's dating (?) someone, he won't hear the end of it when she comes home for Thanksgiving break.

Sadly, it's already too late. Mrs. Wheeler is already moving past Mike to dial the phone herself, rambling on about girls and tuxes and corsages and all the photos she's going to take. All this commotion wakes up Holly, who comes down from her room to ask what's going on, and then Mrs. Wheeler is telling Holly, and then Nancy picks up the phone, and suddenly Mike is being doted over by every female member of his nuclear family.

"How did Mike get a girlfriend?" Nancy teases over speakerphone, "He never leaves the basement."

"Can I do your hair?" Holly pleads. Their parents had purchased her a Barbie styling head for her last birthday, and (in Mike's opinion) the only thing scarier than the large disembodied head of a Barbie was the hairstyles that Holly had given it.

"No!" Mike exclaims.

"Her name is Eleanor," Mrs. Wheeler says, still talking to Nancy over the phone, "She's *lovely*."

"Are you sure she's real?" Nancy jokes, "I mean, remember when he was 7? He said Princess Leia was his girlfriend."

All the clamor causes his father to come over, and that starts yet another round introductions and explanations and *Mike-has-a-GIRLFRIEND!?*'s.

"Have we met this girl?" Ted asks, looking confused.

"*Dad*," Mike says, exasperated, "She's literally been here *two times*. Including *tonight*."

"I don't think so," Ted thinks aloud, "I would have seen her."

"Can I do *her* hair?" Holly asks hopefully.

"I remember that!" Mrs. Wheeler gasps to Nancy, "He was so cute! He had her picture up in his room and everything!"

"Oh my god," Mike groans, burying his face in his hands. He honestly can't believe he's related to any of these people. It seems way too ridiculous to be true—

—just like El actually agreeing to go with him to Homecoming.

Despite his family's antics, it's impossible for Mike to stay upset with that in mind.

"*It's a date*," he repeats under his breath, smiling like an idiot.

## 15. Homecoming

Hopper offers to give El some money to buy a dress for Homecoming, so after school lets out on Friday, she and Max stop by the station to pick it up.

"Keep it decent," Hopper jokes as he hands a \$20 bill to El.

"So, that's a 'no' to our fishnets and mini-skirt plan, then?" Max asks earnestly.

"It's an 'absolutely not,'" Hopper replies flatly.

The girls leave his office with a round of self-amused laughter (Max) and a series of huffy *oh-my-god-Max*'s (El). They then proceed to skate to one of the few women's clothing stores Hawkins has in town. It's not incredibly big, like all the shopping malls El sees on MTV, but it has a wide enough selection that she's got at least some options.

The girls explore every aisle, picking out potential pieces (a black, ruffly dress) and obvious duds (a hand-knit sweater featuring embroidered kittens playing with yarn). Once El has enough things to try on, they head to the dressing rooms that are tucked away in a hallway near the back of the store.

Then El tries on the first outfit.

And then the second.

And third.

And fourth.

And *nothing looks right*.

El's not sure how much time has passed, but as she tries on dress after dress, never satisfied, she finds herself growing increasingly discouraged. Plus, the dressing room smells like mothballs, and the song that's playing on the radio is boring classical music, so the ambiance of the situation isn't great.

"What do you think of this one?" El asks, stepping out of the dressing room.

Max, slouched against the hallway wall, shakes her head. "I mean, it's okay," she shrugs, "But it doesn't have that 'wow' factor, if you know what I mean."

El glances down at the simple navy-blue dress she's wearing and nods resignedly. "You're right," she admits, "I'll try another one."

"You realize that this is like, your millionth one, right?" Max smiles wryly.

El hesitates. "I haven't tried on *that* many..." Her voice trails off as she turns to glance back over her shoulder, where, inside the dressing room, lies a small mountain of silk, taffeta, lace, and satin.

"Oh," El smiles sheepishly.

"Why don't you just pick out something you already have?" Max shrugs, "That's what I'm doing."

"Because all I have is band shirts!" El explains, "I can't wear them to a dance!"

"Says who?"

"...Movies."

"You can't make all your life decisions based off romance movies, El."

"I'm not!" El defends, "I just...I want to look pretty."

For a moment, El is worried that Max will tease her for saying something so sappy, but Max only smiles understandingly. "Well, keep looking then!" She encourages, "We've got all night!"

"You're not bored?"

"No," Max shrugs again, "I mean, it's kind of fun! Plus, if I wasn't here, I'd be sitting around my house, bored out of my mind. Or even worse, having to interact with *Billy*." She crinkles up her nose and sticks out

her tongue at the thought.

"Okay," El giggles, nerves subsiding slightly, "I'll keep looking." She steps back into the dressing room, closes the door behind her, and commences to search through the mountain of dresses for another one to try on.

"You know," Max calls out, "If you can't find anything, you could always go with the kittens sweater!"

"Are you serious?" El snorts.

"Totally!" Max teases, "I bet Wheeler would be into it."

El's just about to reply when she stumbles across something hidden way at the bottom of the pile. It doesn't look like anything else El's tried on, that's for sure. El doesn't even remember picking it out — she thinks she recalls Max tossing it into her arms as a joke.

El gives it a gentle tug, releasing it from the mountain of fabric it's buried underneath. She holds it out in front of her, biting her lower lip as she examines it.

It's definitely...*different*.

But maybe that's a good thing.

Though she feels a little nervous, she ultimately decides to try it on. She slips it on over her head, craning her limbs in an attempt to make it glide on easier. The zipper is way in the back, which is kind of hard for El to reach without bending her arms all weirdly, so she just uses her powers to zipper the dress shut instead.

*There.*

Once everything is in place, she turns to look at herself in the dressing room mirror.

It fits perfectly, and she feels pretty. Like, *really* pretty.

El smiles at her reflection as she gently runs her hands over the fabric. This is it. This *has* to be. She just needs the vote of approval.

She takes a deep breath before stepping out of the dressing room to show Max again.

Max is drumming her fingers against the wall behind her, moving her head along to whatever punk rock song she's singing in her head, but when El steps out, she freezes mid-lyric.

"Holy shit," She exclaims, jaw dropping.

"What do you think?" El asks shyly, giving a little twirl, "Does it have the 'wow' factor?"

"I think," Max begins slowly, before breaking into a wide smile, "Wheeler's gonna lose his shit."

"Then it's perfect," El replies, beaming confidently.

---

If Mike had a say in anything, he would never choose to go clothes shopping with his mom. Mainly because she always picks out stuff that looks like it's more suited for someone that's like, Holly's age. Not only that, but she always gushes about how *handsome* he looks and what a *fine young man* he is.

But, since it's the night before the dance and Mike's pretty much broke, when his mother offers to buy him a suit for tomorrow night, he doesn't really have any other choice.

After supper, Mrs. Wheeler takes Mike shopping. As if the scenario isn't embarrassing enough, Holly comes along with them too, since Ted is, in Karen's words, 'not responsible enough to watch her without falling asleep.'

When they arrive at the general clothing store, it's not very busy (much to Mike's relief — he doesn't know what he'd do if word got out around school that he still goes shopping with his *mom*).

As Mike and his mother look through different racks of clothing, Holly follows Mike around like a shadow, peppering him with questions.

"When is the dance?" Holly asks curiously.

"Tomorrow," Mike replies, eyeing a navy suit jacket.

"Can I go?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because, you gotta be in high school," Mike shrugs.

"Why?"

"Because...just because, okay?"

Holly huffs, evidently both disappointed and dissatisfied with that response. Her frustration doesn't last long though. She stays silent for a grand total of five seconds before coming up with more questions to ask.

"Why are you going with El?" Holly inquires.

As Mike pulls the navy suit off the rack, the unexpected question causes him to jolt with surprise. "W-what!?" He stammers.

"Mommy says that El is your date!" Holly remarks, "Why?"

When Holly turned five, she entered a perpetual curiosity phase. She always had to know the *why* for everything. Clearly, she still hasn't left that phase.

"Because!" Mike replies bashfully, (Holly's 'why' phase was also known as Mike's 'because' phase), "She's...nice."

'Nice' had to be the understatement of the year. But there's no way that Mike is going to tell his six-year-old sister all the details of his feelings towards his crush.

"Do you *like-like* her?" Holly whispers conspiratorially, eyes wide.

Mike glances back at their mother, who's still preoccupied with a clothing rack several feet away, out of earshot.

"Yeah," he whispers back.

Holly gasps and squeals loudly, as if this is the most stunning revelation she's heard all day. This garners Mrs. Wheeler's attention and causes her to glance over at them curiously.

"Is everything okay?" She calls out.

"Yeah!" Mike replies quickly.

"Mike like-likes El!" Holly squeals.

"*Holly!*" Mike snaps, face burning with embarrassment. Thank *god* there aren't any other customers near them right now, otherwise Holly publicly shouting out that he 'like-likes' El would probably be his cause of death.

"He does?" Mrs. Wheeler smiles, walking over to them with an armful of suits and ties.

"Uh huh!" Holly beams, pigtails swaying as she nods her head enthusiastically.

"Oh my god," Mike mutters, avoiding eye contact with either of them.

"Anyway, speaking of El," his mother begins enthusiastically, "What is she going to wear?"

"I dunno," Mike shrugs indifferently, "Whatever she wants."

"You didn't ask her?"

"No?"

"Why not?" Mrs. Wheeler queries confusedly.

Because maybe Mike had other things on his mind? Like how El had worn her hair loose to school again, and Mike still couldn't get over how incredible her curls were. Or how during Biology class, when they were working on their project, she'd been talking about something, and her lips had looked so soft, and Mike couldn't stop himself from staring every now and then. Or how, considering recent events, he's pretty sure that they're gonna kiss soon.

Mike's never kissed anyone, so he's not completely sure. But with all those times that they've almost kissed and gotten interrupted (walking back from the library, camping) and the times that he thought they were going to kiss, but then they didn't (Jennifer's party, after he got out of detention), there has to be at least *one* time where they actually do, right?

Hopefully, that time is going to be tomorrow night. But he's not sure. Maybe he's getting ahead of himself.

"I've been busy," Mike finally answers his mother.

His mother gives a remorseful sort of sigh, and Mike eyes her skeptically.

"Why does it even matter?" Mike asks. Is his mother really *that* obsessed with knowing everything about El?

"I just thought it'd be cute if you matched," Mrs. Wheeler pouts, "We could get you a little boutonniere to go with the color of her dress!"

Now that his mother mentions it, Mike is starting to regret not talking to El about this. Not because he cares about the boutonniere (whatever that is), but because he feels like he's probably going to look like a total dweeb next to her. He's never seen her wear anything other than jeans, let alone a skirt or dress.

He needs to rethink some things.

"Well," his mother continues, "That's okay! We'll just have you try on these!"

She hands him several suit jackets made of garish corduroy, velvet, and suede. As Mike looks them over, his face scrunches up in disdain. "Mom! These look terrible!"

"No, they don't!" Mrs. Wheeler insists, "Just try them on! You'll look so *handsome!*"

There it is.

"I want to pick out what I wear," Mike states firmly.

"Alright," Mrs. Wheeler reluctantly relents, "What do you want to wear?"

Mike pauses. He moves away from his mother and Holly to look at another rack of clothes, at something *different*. He picks out a couple of items and comes back to show his mother, holding them out to her hopefully.

"Something like this?" He asks.

Mrs. Wheeler doesn't look very impressed. "Is *that* what you want?"

Mike shrugs. "Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"Michael—"

"It's good!" Holly interrupts, giving Mike a thumbs up.

"*Thank you,*" Mike replies, giving Holly a grateful nod (even though, to be honest, getting Holly's approval on a fashion choice isn't super comforting — her fashion style often consists of wearing a tutu over her overalls).

Mrs. Wheeler smiles hesitantly at Holly before continuing with another, "But are you sure?"

"Yes!" Mike sighs.

"Are you *sure* that's what you want to wear?" Mrs. Wheeler asks again, voice pitched with doubt.

"Yes!" Mike says for what has to be the hundredth time. He doesn't know why she keeps asking. He's not going to change his mind just because she keeps looking all skeptically at him and repeating the same question.

Thankfully, his mother finally relents. "Alright," she sighs, "If that's what you want, Michael."

"It is!" Mike nods.

His mother nods resignedly, takes the outfit from him, and goes to put back the items she picked out. Mike and Holly follow her as she then leads the way up to the register, still looking over Mike's outfit hesitantly.

"It's just," she says, running her hands over it, "I'm so used to picking out things for you. But now you're all grown up and going to dances with girls and — you're becoming such a *fine young man*."

There it is again.

"*Mom!*" Mike groans.

"I'm sorry!" His mother smiles, "I'm just so happy for you, Michael. I know you had a rough start to the year, but I think that things have really gotten better!"

As embarrassing as his mom's sentiments are, they're all true. Earlier this year, when Mike started his Sophomore year, he'd felt a little disheartened by the entire situation. While his freshman year hadn't been terrible, he still didn't feel like he and his friends really belonged. They were always either picked on or snubbed. They never really fit in with anyone else (not that they wanted to, or anything, but it would have been nice to know that they *could* have).

Then they got detention, they met El and Max, and suddenly Mike realized that fitting in was kind of overrated.

"Yeah, things are better," Mike tells his mother, "Way better."

"Because of El!" Holly beams, hopping in place with excitement.

She says it so definitively, so confidently, so much so that for once, Mike doesn't even try to deny it.

"Yeah," he nods, tugging on one of her pigtails affectionately, "Because of El."

---

On Saturday evening, Max decides to come over to El's house so that

they can get ready for the dance together.

"There's no way I'm going to let Billy drive us there," she explains once she arrives, "Which would probably happen if we got ready at my place."

"Good point," El nods, ushering Max up to her bedroom.

It almost feels like the time they got ready for Jennifer's party together, with the amount of time they spend doing their hair, applying their makeup, and singing along to the radio. Only this time, El doesn't feel anxious. This time, she's more than ready to go on a date with Mike.

Another aspect that's different this time around: Hopper actually knows where they're going.

When he comes to check on them an hour before the dance, Madonna's *Like A Virgin* is playing over the radio and El and Max are lip-syncing along. They're sitting on her bed, dressed in their Homecoming attire, and surrounded by nail polish bottles, curlers, hair brushes, makeup brushes, and lip gloss tubes. They're both holding handheld mirrors as they work, applying their eyeshadow with careful precision.

Hopper knocks on the door before entering, looking bemusedly intrigued. "How's it coming?"

"Good!" El and Max reply, neither looking away from their mirror.

As they continue to work, Hopper stops to listen to the lyrics of the song. "You girls like this?" He asks, motioning to the radio on El's dresser.

The question is innocent enough, but it's said in a tone that El knows far too well. It's the same tone El used when she asked Max the same question about *Halloween*.

"Yes?" El replies, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. "Why?"

"It's just," Hopper hesitates, voice a little gruff with reluctance, "Isn't this song about...you know..."

"Doing it?" Max answers, completely deadpan.

El, in contrast to Max's nonchalance, nearly pokes herself in the eye with her eyeshadow brush. "MAX!" She snaps, turning to glare at her friend.

"What?!" Max shrugs, "It *is!*"

"That's not *all* it's about!"

"That's what it's *mostly* about!"

"It's just," Hopper continues, still looking reluctant, "You're going out with that Wheeler kid, tonight, and...well..."

He doesn't have to finish the sentence for Max and El to pick up on what he's worried about.

"We're not going to do anything like that," El insists, turning to meet Hopper's gaze.

"They're definitely not," Max smirks, "I mean, they haven't even kissed."

In a matter of seconds, Hopper goes from seeming a little worried to being outwardly confounded. "The kid hasn't even kissed you yet?" He asks, astonished.

"No!" El exclaims, "Why would he?"

"It's just, I thought you guys were," Hopper begins, motioning to the Rubik's cube on El's nightstand, "You know. A thing."

"We're not dating!" El contests, "Why does everyone always say that?"

"Why don't you?" Max counters, "Don't get mad because the rest of us have *eyes*."

"I have eyes," El huffs, rolling her eyes for emphasis.

"So," Hopper continues in that 'casual' way of his, "Do you think he's going to—"

"Kiss her?" Max finishes, "Yeah, we've been wondering the same thing. We all have a bet going, actually."

"You have a *what*!?" El gasps indignantly.

"A bet! I get 5 bucks if Mike kisses you and Dustin gets 5 if you kiss him. If you don't kiss tonight, Lucas gets 5. Will offered us 5 dollars to 'mind our own business,' so I guess he's out."

Hopper tries to hold back his laughter, but only winds up snorting instead.

El, on the other hand, has no trouble expressing how she feels about the situation. "I can't believe you guys!" She grumbles, turning her attention back to her mirror.

"That's what we've been saying!" Max stresses, "Like, what's taking you two so long?"

El decides to not warrant Max's teasing with any further response. Instead, she focuses her attention on making sure that her eyeshadow looks perfect.

A few moments pass and El realizes that her dad still hasn't left the doorway. He's giving her the contemplative cop-stare again, the one that never fails to rattle her nerves.

"What?" El asks worriedly.

"Nothing!" Hopper replies unconvincingly.

"Is something wrong?" El frets, setting down her mirror and eyeshadow, "Do I look bad?"

"No!" Hopper insists, more believably this time, "You look great, kid. Really. It's just..."

"Just?" El echoes, looking puzzled.

"It's just..." Hopper begins slowly, "I'm really happy that you still get to do this kind of stuff, you know? Like...that you get to go to dances, and have friends, and talk about boys you like."

El softens. "Oh," she murmurs.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is," Hopper continues, "I'm just really happy that you still get a chance to be a normal kid."

Though he's not saying it outright, El knows what he's trying to convey. She can't even begin to imagine how horrible her life would be if Hopper had never rescued her, if her life never amounted to anything more than a science experiment and a number.

"I just want you to have a good life," Hopper finishes, "I want you to be happy."

El smiles gratefully at him. Her gaze then moves towards the polaroids of her friends that hang above her bed, the Rubik's cube on her nightstand, the blue bracelet on her wrist (always on her wrist, even tonight) and finally to Max, who's still seated beside her.

It's in that moment that El, despite her troubled past and various struggles, realizes that she couldn't dream up a better life for herself if she tried. Even if she could, she wouldn't want to trade the one she has for the world.

"I am happy," El smiles wider, turning to look at Hopper again, "*Really* happy."

"Good," Hopper smiles back. He glances at the alarm clock on her nightstand and motions towards it. "Well, you girls got less than an hour before the dance."

"We know!" El nods, picking up her mirror again, "We'll be ready."

"Alright," Hopper replies, "Just let me know when you're ready for me to drive you, kid."

El nods as she gets back to work on adding the last few touches to her makeup. Her dad starts to leave but winds up pausing in the doorway.

"Oh, and Max?" He asks, turning to look at them again.

"Yeah, Chief?" Max perks up.

"Can you add me to that betting pool of yours?"

"Dad!" El gasps.

"Yes!" Max exclaims gleefully, "What do you wanna bet?"

"5 bucks says he's gonna kiss her," Hopper propositions, "But, before he does, he's gonna start rambling about all that weird Star Wars shit."

Max laughs so hard, she's practically cackling. "YES!" She gasps in between laughs.

If El hadn't spent so much effort on her hair and makeup, she'd definitely bury her face in her pillow. Instead, she flicks her head and uses her powers to fling pillows in both of their directions. She smiles mischievously as she hears two exclamations of indignation, as well as the soft thud of a pillow bouncing off someone's head (Max) and legs (Hopper).

"Mike isn't going to do that," El says coolly.

"He so is!" Mike smirks, fixing her hair, "Better get ready to pucker up, El, you're getting kissed by the biggest geek in school tonight."

"But I thought Lucas was going to kiss you?" El asks innocently.

El gets a pillow to the head for that one.

---

"Come, on, admit it," Mike murmurs, "Sometimes you think I'm alright."

This is it: the moment he's been waiting for. He tries his best to keep his voice as smooth and suave as possible as he gives a small, laid-back smirk.

"You like me because I'm a scoundrel," he continues, a dreamy glint in his eye, "There aren't enough scoundrels in your life."

Mike leans in slowly as his eyes close. Just a bit closer, and—

"Michael?" A voice interrupts, knocking on the bathroom door.

The unexpected interruption causes Mike to bang his forehead against the mirror. He swears and rubs his forehead in pain, glaring at his reflection with annoyance.

"What is it, Mom?" He replies grumpily.

"I heard you talking?" Mrs. Wheeler explains, "What are you doing in there?"

Definitely not quoting Star Wars in order to help him practice kissing El.

"Nothing!" Mike snaps back defensively.

"Oh. Well, the dance started 10 minutes ago, Michael! You better finish up what you're doing!"

Mike glances at his watch and sees that she's right. It's 8:40 and he's totally lost track of time.

"I'll be right out!" Mike exclaims, hurriedly finishing up the last details of his look. A small adjustment there, a touch of product there, and—

He steps back to examine his reflection. He's not sure if he has it completely right, but it'll have to do.

Thankfully, he's already fully dressed and ready to go. He hurries out of the bathroom door and into the hallway—

—only to run right into his mom, who's holding her camera.

She squeals when she sees him emerge and promptly proceeds to take a photo.

"Mom!" Mike snaps, "What are you doing?"

"It's your first school dance!" His mother gushes, catching the Polaroid as it prints, "I want to remember it!"

"I thought you didn't even like how I looked!" Mike points out.

"Well," she hesitates, "Your outfit wouldn't have been my first choice, but you still look very handsome."

Mike rolls his eyes and moves past her, headed down the stairs. "No pictures!" He pleads, moving into the foyer. "Let's just get going!"

"I still don't see why you're not picking up El," Mrs. Wheeler laments as she follows Mike downstairs.

Because Mike would sooner jump off the Quarry than allow his Mom to drive him and his date anywhere?

"She lives far," Mike replies, slipping on his shoes, "And I think she's going with Max."

Ted and Holly are in the living room, watching the 8 o'clock news (well, kind of — Ted is snoring on his Lay-Z-Boy, Holly is reenacting the news telecast with her stuffed animals). As Mrs. Wheeler sets down her camera and grabs her coat, Holly gets up and runs over to them, smiling excitedly.

"Bye, Mike!" She smiles, hugging him. Since Mike is so tall and she's still so small, her face just reaches his belly button.

Mike pats the top of her head affectionately. "Bye, Holls."

Of course, his mom has to take a picture of this.

"Mom!" Mike snaps for the umpteenth time.

"You just looked so cute!" Karen simpers.

"I'm going to the car," Mike grumbles, pulling away from Holly and heading out the front door.

He hears his mom stop to wake Ted up before she follows Mike to the car. They get inside, buckle up, and then they're off.

As they get closer to school, Mike can feel his nerves start to go haywire. He finds himself second guessing everything, like whether

or not his outfit is okay (probably not), whether or not he should have gotten El like, flowers or something (probably yes), and whether or not he's going to make a fool of himself tonight (definitely yes).

When the car pulls to a stop in front of Hawkins High, Mike can't help but feel a little dizzy. He better not faint. Oh god, if he just like, walks in and passes out, he'll never live it down.

"Alright!" His mother says excitedly, turning to smile at him, "Here we are!"

"Yup," Mike sighs, taking a steady breath. He starts to unbuckle his seatbelt, but his mom stops him by placing her hand on his arm.

"Take lots of pictures!" She requests fervently, "If you end early, you can bring El back to our house!"

"Okay," Mike replies, well aware that neither of those things is going to happen.

His mom leans in to kiss his forehead, and Mike scrunches up his face in response.

"Ew, mom!" He whines, pulling back. His nose is filled with the odor of her perfume and now he has a big lipstick stain on his forehead.

"Have fun!" His mother smiles, ignoring his complaints. She gives his cheek an affectionate pat, and Mike responds by wiping his forehead, unbuckling his seatbelt, and exiting the vehicle.

Mrs. Wheeler waves goodbye before driving off, leaving Mike to enter the school alone.

He bites down on his lower lip and balls his hands into fists (though he's not really sure why — is he planning on *fighting* his way into the gym? Why is he so *weird*?). He walks through the front doors and follows the path of streamers and balloons that wind down the hallways. There are a couple of well-dressed students milling about, leaning up against the lockers, and as Mike walks past he can't help but notice the curious glances they're giving him.

As he gets closer to the gym, he can hear the muffled bass of synth-

pop music growing louder. He can hear elated laughter and excited chatter, and it causes his heart rate to increase.

*Paladin*, he reminds himself, *You got this*. He doesn't know why he always repeats this to himself, after all, it kind of seems to jinx the situation he's nervous about (Jennifer's party, studying with El at the library), but it's the only comforting thought Mike has at the moment and he's sticking with it.

The doors to the gym are propped open, allowing for the music and voices to spill into the hallway. Mike's never been to one of these, so he's not sure what to expect once he steps inside.

What he's greeted with has to be a scene right out of every high school movie ever. The gym is decorated with colorful streamers, strands of twinkle lights, and a glittering disco ball. There's a balloon arch over the entryway, and as Mike passes under it, he can't help but notice that it's not quite wide enough to reach both sides of the gym (it comes short by about 5 feet, which makes sense as, according to Jennifer, the South wall is *55 feet* wide, NOT *50*).

Toto's *Africa* is playing over the speakers. The center of the gym is filled with dancing couples, slowly moving to the song's amiable beat. The outskirts of the dance floor are lined with tables that are covered with white tablecloths and surrounded by metal folding chairs. As Mike looks around the scene, he spots Dustin, Will, and Lucas seated at one of the tables. They're dressed in nice suits (Dustin, sans baseball hat), collared shirts (Lucas), and knit sweater vests (Will).

So like, the exact opposite of what he's wearing.

Mike mentally readies himself before crossing the gym and making his way over to them. Maybe his friends will be chill about it. Maybe they won't point out what a weirdo he is.

His 'maybes' are quickly shut down once Will sees him.

Will's eyes widen in surprise, his mouth falls open, and his entire expression just reads as a giant question mark.

"What's wrong, Will?" Lucas asks, but then he turns around, sees Mike

too, and within seconds, his expression matches Will's perfectly.

"What?" Dustin frowns as Mike comes to a stop in front of their table.

"Hey," Mike sighs.

Dustin turns to look at him, and Mike prepares himself to face another horrifiedly confused facial expression.

Except that doesn't happen.

Instead of looking surprised, confused, or vaguely alarmed, Dustin screams with laughter. His bursts of laughter echo throughout the gym, and he has to slap a hand over his mouth to avoid drawing any further attention over to them.

"*MIKE!?*" Dustin howls, "W-what...w-what the hell?!"

"Shut up!" Mike snaps defensively, hoping that if he seems annoyed, they won't tell how embarrassed he feels.

"What are you wearing?" Lucas asks carefully.

"Clothes!" Mike scowls.

"Y-you do realize," Dustin stammers, nearly crying now, "Th-that Halloween was *Thursday*, M-Mike!?"

*Halloween? Really?*

"Oh, c'mon," Mike frowns, "It's not that bad, is it?" He turns to look at Will, who's still gaping at Mike.

"You look good!" Will assures him with a quick nod, but his voice is pitched a little higher, and his smile is a little shaky, and that's when Mike knows that Will is lying.

"Great," Mike mutters dejectedly, looking at his feet.

"It's j-just..." Dustin wheezes, "It's....s-so—"

"Different!" Will finishes, throwing Dustin a dirty look.

"Yeah!" Lucas nods hastily, "It's really different!"

"I bet El will like it!" Will adds.

"I can't BREATHE!" Dustin gasps.

"Is El here yet?" Mike asks, ignoring Dustin.

"No," Lucas replies, shaking his head sadly. "She's supposed to show up with Max, but I think they're running late—AND THERE SHE IS!" Lucas can't stop his voice from cracking as he squeals the last part. His face splits into a shamelessly excited grin as he looks towards the entrance of the gym.

The rest of the boys rise to their feet, and within the blink of an eye, Mike swivels around to face the entryway. Sure enough, Max is walking through the balloon arch. She's wearing faded light-rinse jeans and a black sweater. The fabric of the sweater almost seems iridescent — as it catches the light, it glimmers with flecks of silver. Her hair is pulled back into a teased ponytail, held together with a silver scrunchy.

So if Max is here, then her best friend can't be that far behind, right?

He gets his answer when Max meets his gaze, raises her eyebrows, and drops her jaw.

*Holy shit!* She mouths, turning to look at someone behind her.

And that's when he sees her.

Mike almost doesn't recognize her — he has to do a double take to be certain. But when he glances back for the second time, he can't look away from El. He has the same rollercoaster-drop feeling that he had when they first met, when she gave him the completed Rubik's cube. Stomach plunging, heart racing, excitement swelling, head spinning.

She's wearing a dress (yes, *a dress* — with short, poofy sleeves, an ankle-length skirt, and everything) that's a flattering shade of blush. The fabric is a soft, matte satin, while the outer bodice and sleeves are layered with a matching shade of lace. As El turns to look around the gymnasium, Mike gets a good view of the back of her dress. The

lace layer creates a modest v-shaped back neckline that slopes downward, pointing towards the big, satin bow and delicate lace bustle that sits at the back of her waist.

Her hair is loose, curly, and pulled back with a couple barrettes. Her dark black eyeshadow has been replaced with a shade of pink, and even from this distance, Mike can tell that she's wearing a bit of lip gloss.

"Is that *El*!?" Someone exclaims behind Mike. It's probably one of his friends, he's not sure which one. He's pretty sure all of his senses have shut down, at this point.

She looks...

*"Incredible,"* Mike says hoarsely.

El finally spots him. Like Max, her jaw also drops when she sees him. Her eyes scan him over; Mike feels his blood run cold.

Shit.

He turns to glance down at his outfit — his stupid, terrible, colossal-mistake-of-an outfit.

Hopefully, El won't hate him for this.

---

When El's eyes land on Mike, her heart stops. Not because she's nervous or scared (for once), but because she's shocked. Shocked doesn't even begin to capture how she feels, actually. She feels more surprised than Jessica was in that soap opera when she found out that her sister was really alive and having an affair with Robert, her long-lost half-brother.

Mike just looks so...*different*. She tries not to gape as her eyes move up his body, but she can't help herself. He's wearing his regular Converse sneakers, but that's about the only 'normal' thing he's wearing. The rest of his attire consists of distressed dark-rinse jeans, a heather-grey t-shirt with a black leather jacket layered over it and—

*His hair.*

Any of El's attempts to stop her jaw from dropping are quickly forgotten once she sees his hair. His dark, wavy locks are slicked back in a long pompadour. Despite his obvious attempts to keep it slicked back, a few strands curl atop the rest, softening the look.

*Holy shit.*

She watches as Mike pales and turns to glance down at his outfit, looking embarrassed. He turns to look back up at her with a sheepish smile, and that's when she knows.

She loves him.

She kind of already knew that she did. After all, she told Max she did, back on the bleachers. But now, gazing at him from across the room, she doesn't just *know* it, but she *feels* it. It hits her without warning, and suddenly that brain/heart-explosion feeling slams right into her with full force.

She doesn't know how she's able to move, since her brain has pretty much turned into a mushy mess, but she finds herself walking closer to him, slowly closing the distance between them. Her heartbeat feels like it's moving at the speed of hummingbird's wings.

*Cute, cute, cute, cute.*

Mike smiles wider as he moves forward to meet her. They come to a stop in front of each other, both looking completely stunned.

El beams up at him, feeling like she's going to melt on the spot. He looks so *punk* and yet so *pretty* — it's seriously not fair.

Mike beams back at her, eyes shining.

"You look—" They both begin.

"—Beautiful!" Mike gushes.

"—Bitchin'!" El giggles.

She can hear their friends snorts of amusement in the background, and it's only then that El realizes the rest of the boys are standing

behind Mike.

"Holy shit!" Dustin cackles, "Did you guys plan this or something?"

"No," Mike smiles, not taking his eyes off El.

"Sweet threads, Wheeler," Max smirks, coming up from behind El. She walks past the pair and moves in to greet Lucas with a punch to the arm, blushing as he pulls her into a welcoming hug.

"I can't believe you guys just pulled a *Grease*," Dustin exclaims, snickering gleefully, "That's like, my mom's favorite movie."

El and Mike only nod distractedly in response, neither really focused on anything or anyone other than each other.

"You didn't have to change for me," El tells him, smiling softly.

"Neither did you!" Mike insists.

"I thought you'd like it," El explains shyly, fluffing her skirt a little bit.

"I do!" Mike grins, "I mean, I like you all the time, but I...I mean, you look good in everything." He pauses to glance down at his outfit again. "Then there's me. I just look like an idiot."

"No!" El insists, "You look good!"

Good doesn't even begin to describe how he looks, really. But Dustin is already making gagging noises in the background, and El's pretty sure that if she was to verbalize just how incredibly perfect/gorgeous/adorable/irresistible Mike looks to her right now, it'd only make things worse.

Instead, she expresses her admiration for Mike by moving in to hug him, ignoring the simpering round of '*awwww*'s the action garners from their friends.

"I'm totally getting that \$5," Dustin whispers to Max, to which Max nudges him and hisses for him to *shut the hell up* in response.

"What?" Mike frowns, looking confused.

"Nothing!" Max, Dustin, and Lucas chime together.

El eyes them reluctantly as she pulls away from Mike. She would complain about how totally weird her friends are being, but considering that she herself is pretty weird, that would probably be hypocritical. Besides, their shared weirdness is probably the reason they're such good friends in the first place.

"So," Will smiles, looking at the group, "What should we do now?"

"What do people do at dances?" Lucas asks, "Other than dance, I mean."

"Stand around awkwardly?" Max offers, "So, I guess we got that down already."

"Uh," Mike begins, glancing around the gym, "I mean...there's like, food over there."

"If there's any Fruit Loops," Dustin sniggers, "We all better watch out!"

"Mike's on the loose!" Max adds, bursting into laughter.

"Seriously?" Mike snaps, "You guys are *still* laughing about that? I ate them *one* time!"

Max and Dustin's laughter dies down as the ambient rhythms of *Africa* fade away. In its place, a charged, energetic, electric drumbeat pounds through the gym.

El recognizes the song at once. Even though the only dancing she's really done is impromptu little dance parties with Max in their rooms, when a-ha's *Take On Me* starts playing over the speakers, she's overwhelmed with the urge to head straight to the dance floor.

The song is just so catchy, and all the other kids look like they're having so much fun dancing to it, and when El glances at the rest of her friends, she can see that they're all starting to tap their feet, whether they're trying to hide it (Mike), or not (Dustin).

"This song is kind of awesome!" Dustin smiles, glancing at everyone.

"We should go dance!" El smiles back, already bouncing on the spot.

"Dance?" Lucas echoes, "Like, all of us?"

"Can we?!" Will asks eagerly.

"In *front* of everyone?" Mike says nervously.

"Well, we can all try to squeeze into the broom closet, if that's what you want, Wheeler," Max offers.

Mike laughs sarcastically, while everyone else laughs genuinely.

"I say we do it," Dustin shrugs, "I mean, I think it's like, physically impossible to not dance to this song."

"Exactly!" Will nods.

"Then let's go!" El beams, reaching out to grab Mike's hand.

Mike seems a little anxious about dancing, but at El's touch, he visibly loosens up with a small smile.

El pulls him to the dance floor, followed by Max, Lucas, Dustin, and Will. They make their way towards the fringe of the crowd, and without further hesitation, break out into a dance.

Then again, 'dance' is a subjective term for it. Mike is hopelessly awkward as he sways in place, failing to keep up with the beat, despite Will and El's instructions to follow their lead. Dustin, on the other end of the spectrum, gets far too into it, and winds up far ahead of the beat. Max and Lucas are the only ones who actually manage to keep rhythm, bobbing their heads as shuffle their feet to the music.

It's kind of a hot mess, and some of the other students are giving them funny looks, but the more they allow themselves to get into it, the less they really care.

"We need to sync up!" Dustin pants during the bridge of the song, still dancing over-enthusiastically, "It'll be really cool!"

"What's that dance from that one movie you like?" Max asks, turning

to look at El. "The one where they all get detention?"

"*The Breakfast Club?*" El clarifies.

"Yeah! We should do that!"

El is so thrilled by the prospect of reenacting one of her favorite scenes from one of her favorite movies, she can't stop herself from giggling with excitement. "Okay!" She beams.

"What dance?" Mike asks curiously.

"Just watch me," El instructs.

Her friends all stop to watch as El demonstrates the three basic moves that make up the group dance from the movie. She has to speed them up slightly to match the beat of *Take On Me*, but it still works well enough.

After watching her repeat it a couple times, Max joins in, then Dustin and Will, and lastly Mike and Lucas. As they move in sync together, Dustin can't stop exclaiming how *totally awesome* this is, and Max can't stop snickering about how Mike is *still* off-beat, even while doing the simple side-step. Mike seems a little flustered, but then he meets El's gaze, El gives him a reassuring smile, and he relaxes, smiling back at her.

By the time the song ends, they're all thoroughly winded (and earned more judgmental stares from their classmates) but nevertheless, they're laughing, breathless, and having a great time.

As they stop to compose themselves, the next song starts to come on, a much slower one that makes Will scrunch up his nose.

"Ugh," Will groans, "Not this."

"What's this?" El asks curiously.

"It's *Kenny Rogers*," Will mutters, "His music is so boring."

"Yeah, this sounds pretty lame," Max concurs. Her eyes narrow as she glances around the room, almost as if she's expecting Kenny Rogers

himself to be singing in some corner of the gym.

"Well, the DJ table is over there," Mike says, giving El a gentle nudge before pointing towards the back of the gym, "You could ask them to change the song."

El kind of hates that Mike nudging her is enough to send shivers down her spine. At the same time, she kind of loves it.

"Oh," She replies simply, smiling at him like a total dope.

"I don't want to tell them to change the song though," Will frowns, "That seems rude."

"We could ask them to play a song *after* this one," El offers, turning to look at Will.

Will brightens. "Like *The Clash*?"

"Yes!" El nods eagerly, "Let's do it!"

"We'll just chill here," Max shrugs, "I guess."

El and Will nod before they leave together. They're both kind of on the small side, but for once, that works in their favor. It makes it easier to navigate past all the slow dancing couples.

They make their way to the DJ table. It's cluttered with sound equipment, towered with boxes of records, snaked with colorful wires, and manned by one lanky, pimply student from the Junior class.

"What do you want?" He asks, pushing up the rim of his glasses as Will and El come to a stop in front of the table.

"We'd like to request a song," Will asks nicely.

"What song?" The DJ asks in a droning sort of voice.

Will and El turn to look at each other.

"What one should we choose?" Will asks worriedly, "We both have

different favorites."

"We can choose *Should I Stay or Should I Go*," El proposes.

"But you like *Police and Thieves*," Will reminds her.

"What about *Up in Heaven*?" El suggests, "That one is nice."

"That one isn't bad," Will admits.

"Are you guys talking about The Clash?" The DJ asks, looking at them skeptically.

"Yes!" El and Will smile. Have they found another fan?

"Yeah, I'm not playing that."

Oh.

"What?" Will exclaims, looking personally offended.

"Why won't you play The Clash?" El frowns.

"Because," the student shrugs, "All their songs are like...super depressing."

"That's what makes them good!" Will protests.

"Still," he replies with a shrug, "I don't want to bum people out."

If there's one thing El hates about her current attire, it's that she's lost all of her intimidatory edge. When she glares at someone while wearing dark eyeshadow, ripped jeans, and a leather jacket, they usually look pretty freaked out. Now, when El crosses her arms and glares at the DJ, she just looks pouty and the DJ looks thoroughly unfazed.

"Play them," El orders, still trying to sound intimidating anyway.

"Please?" Will asks politely.

The student glances between them, looking pretty tired. "Fine, whatever," he eventually says with an eye roll, "I'll try to pick

something. But you're going to have to wait, I have like, a million requests to get through."

"That's fine!" El beams, brightening instantly.

"Thank you!" Will adds gratefully.

The DJ just shrugs in response. As he begins to search through his stacks of records, El and Will make their way back to their friends.

"Are you having fun so far?" Will asks as he and El wind through the crowd.

"Yes!" El replies, "Are you?"

Will nods. "I was kind of worried, at first," he admits.

"Why?" El asks curiously.

"I dunno," Will shrugs shyly, "We've never been to a dance before."

"Neither have Max and I."

"Is it what you thought it'd be like?" Will inquires, "Like, in the movies?"

"Some things," El muses, "But...not everything." She motions her head towards Mike, which causes Will to laugh.

"Yeah!" Will replies, "I don't think we expected that, either. I guess it's not that surprising though."

"What do you mean?" El asks inquisitively.

"Because he wants to impress you."

"He does? Why?!"

Will blinks at her for a moment, looking genuinely surprised. Then his face relaxes into a bemused smile, and he shakes his head at her reprimanding sort of way. "Wow. I can see why you guys like each other so much."

"What?!" El stammers, cheeks flushing pink, "Why?"

"You're both oblivious!" Will teases, "It's obvious that Mike likes you. Do you really think he'd dress like that otherwise?"

"No," El admits.

"Exactly," Will nods, "I don't know why you guys keep pretending like you don't like each other."

Because it seems way too good to be true. El sometimes has to pinch herself because she still can't believe that she has friends who know about her powers and support her regardless. It's even harder to believe that one of those friends could be as dedicated, loving, and adoring as Mike (and as perfect/gorgeous/adorable/irresistible, but that's not the main point).

"I'm sorry," El apologizes bashfully, "I...I won't do that anymore."

"Good!" Will smiles, "Now you guys just gotta get together already."

Before El can respond, they reach their friends again, who are currently trying to teach Mike to dance.

"Just follow the steps!" Max huffs.

"I am!" Mike defends, shuffling his feet in an awkward manner.

"I think all that hair product killed some of the brain cells that control your motor skills," Dustin snorts.

"It did not!"

"El!" Max sighs, turning to look at El and Will, "You need to teach your boyfriend to dance."

"He's not—!" El begins instinctively. But then she meets Will's gaze, he gives her a warning look, and she backtracks.

"C'mere," she instead says, moving to stand beside Mike.

Mike smiles, looking quite flustered, but when El starts to guide him

through a couple steps, he becomes hyper-focused on following her instructions to a T.

He totally wants to impress her. He has the same look he got when he was fixing the projector and trying to solve the Rubik's cube — his brow is furrowed, there's a determined glint in his eye, and when he finally manages to succeed at completing a step — the dorky, excited smile he gives her nearly takes her breath away.

They definitely need to get together already.

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After Will and El come back from requesting their song, Mike and his friends resume their own awkward version of dancing (well, Mike's awkward version — the rest of his friends are obviously way better than him, despite El's gracious instruction).

All of the songs are pretty fast-paced, meaning that there's no time to worry about slow dances, not yet, anyway.

Surprisingly, Mike doesn't feel completely terrified by the prospect of slow dancing with El. Sure, he's probably going to make a fool of himself, but it's kind of hard to care when El is already dancing near him, throwing him shy smiles, and looking *amazing*.

Sometimes, during some of the faster songs, she'll grab his hands and pull him into a little dance with her. It never lasts more than a couple seconds, and she usually follows it up by going to dance closer to Max or Will, but it leaves Mike starry-eyed every time.

He finds himself praying that the next song will be a slow one, but it doesn't happen. Instead, he continues to dance with all his friends until they've thoroughly exhausted themselves. They decide to take a break and head to the snack table, which, surprisingly, is being run by Jennifer Hayes.

Will throws Mike an anxious look, but Mike only gives him a reassuring smile.

As Mike and his friends stock up on refreshments (cookies, an unhealthy amount of cookies), Jennifer eyes them warily.

"How's it going, Jennifer?" Dustin greets, adding another cookie to the growing pile he has in his arms.

"Boring," Jennifer huffs, "I got stuck here, because apparently only Senior Homecoming committee members get to have fun."

"That sucks," Max replies disinterestedly, reaching for a gingersnap cookie.

El cautiously eyes the punch bowl before looking up at Jennifer. "What's in the punch?" She asks nervously.

As El pouts worriedly, Mike feels himself go into protective mode. He casually moves to stand beside her, allowing his arm to brush against her shoulder. While he's not planning on doing anything rash, he just wants El to be aware of his presence — he's here for her.

El seems to take note of this as she turns to throw him a grateful glance.

"It's just fruit punch," Jennifer shrugs, "And like, Sprite."

"That's it?" Mike questions.

"That's it," Jennifer nods.

El, looking reassured, grabs herself a cup of punch. The rest of their friends follow suit. With a slightly awkward 'goodbye' to Jennifer, they take their snacks and make their way to one of the tables.

They take their seats in their usual order. As other kids continue to dance to the upbeat music, Mike and his friends sit, eat their cookies, drink their punch, and chat about whatever comes to mind.

"How many horror movies take place at school dances?" Dustin asks Max.

"Why?" Max asks back, looking puzzled.

Even though Mike's trying to focus on their conversation, he's a little distracted by the fact that El has kind of inched her chair closer to his. As she munches away on her sugar cookies, her leg lightly

brushes against his.

Mike glances at her, but other than the playful smile she's trying to hide, she doesn't give him any sign that she purposely brushed their legs together.

"I wanna know if the 'first-couple-is-the-first-to-die' rule still applies," Dustin explains.

"Why?" Lucas frowns.

Mike glances under the table at El's feet. It's only then that he realizes this entire time, she's been wearing her regular, scuffed-up white sneakers with her dress.

*Of course she is,* Mike thinks with a grin. In a weird way, it's almost comforting to see a hint of her classic punk self amongst all the pink and lace. Though El may have changed her attire for tonight, she's still the same person underneath it all.

"For science," Dustin answers unconvincingly.

"Who are you planning on being a couple with?" Lucas inquires, sounding genuinely curious.

Mike keeps his gaze averted away from El as he casually knocks his foot against hers. He hears her hold back a small squeak of surprise. He has to bite down on his lower lip to keep himself from laughing as she quickly masks the squeak with a cough.

"Uh," Dustin hesitates, "I mean..."

With a determined glint in her eye, El gives Mike a playful kick under the table. Mike responds with a little kick of his own, and then they're going back and forth, each taking their turn to knock their sneaker against the others in a good-natured battle.

Even though neither is looking at the other, Mike and El's shared smiles and barely held back laughter quickly give them away.

"What are you guys doing?" Max asks, quirking an eyebrow at them.

"Nothing!" Mike and El reply hastily, yanking their legs apart and straightening up in their seats.

Their friends eye them suspiciously, but El only goes right back to eating her cookies as Mike takes a long sip of his punch.

"Uh, anyway," Dustin continues, turning his attention back to the others, "I don't know who."

"You know," Will says gently, "Otherwise you wouldn't have brought it up."

Dustin glances over at the snack table before hesitantly confessing, "I mean, maybe I'll ask Jennifer to dance."

"Jennifer?" Mike repeats, trying not to sound too disdainful. Ever since the whole incident with Will, his disillusionment with Jennifer has kind of grown bigger. Not that she like, did anything bad or wrong, but Mike's still feeling a little off-put by the whole situation. Plus, after Will turned her down, she said that she might ask Troy instead (who's thankfully absent tonight). Anyone who would even *consider* going to Homecoming with someone like Troy clearly couldn't be trusted.

"Well, yeah!" Dustin defends, "I heard that Troy turned her down, so she's probably like, super lonely! Her standards are probably low enough to agree to dance with me!"

"If Jennifer has to lower her standards to want to dance with you," Max says definitively, "Then she doesn't deserve you in the first place."

A beat of stunned silence passes as everyone processes this statement.

Dustin blinks at her speechlessly, completely taken aback. "Did you just...*compliment* me?"

"Yeah," Max says with an eye roll, "And it's the only time it's ever going to happen for the rest of your life, so don't get used to it."

"Did all of you guys get replaced by aliens or something?" Lucas jokes, motioning between Max and Mike.

"They gotta be aliens — that's the only rational explanation," Dustin nods.

Max makes a face at both Dustin and Lucas, but then Lucas smiles at her, and she softens. "Shut up," she mumbles, gently pushing Lucas' face away.

It's pretty cute how much Lucas is able to make Max melt. Mike would point this out, but he's pretty sure Max would kill him. Instead, he settles for exchanging knowing glances with El as Max leans closer to Lucas and drapes her legs across his lap.

As their conversation dwindles, the upbeat pop song that's been playing ends. As the song changes, a familiar guitar riff sounds throughout the gym, warranting an excited gasp from Will and El.

"The Clash!" They exclaim, turning to exchange elated looks.

"I love this song!" Will beams.

"Me too!" El nods.

"I know this song!" Mike grins, "*Police On My Back!*"

"Yes!" Will and El reply, both nodding to Mike approvingly.

"We have to dance!" Will says to El. He pauses and turns to glance at Mike, looking a little hesitant, "I mean, if that's okay?"

Mike smiles back at him. "Of course that's fine!" He assures them. He'd never be against his two best friends spending time together. He trusts Will completely. Plus now, thanks to what happened with Jennifer earlier in the week, he knows what Will's...hiding? Exploring? Considering? It's still a little unclear, probably to both of them.

Either way, Mike's willing to give Will all the time he needs to figure it out. The fact that Will knows that he knows this and still asks Mike for his permission to dance with El just goes to show how loyal they are to each other.

"Let's go!" El smiles, grabbing Will's hand and pulling him up from

the table. They run back to the dance floor hand-in-hand, and before long are jumping up and down as they dance together, enthusiastically singing the days of the week in time with the lyrics.

"They're such dweebs," Max remarks as she watches them, leaning her head on Lucas' shoulder.

"Takes one to know one, MadMax," Dustin quips.

Max replies by chucking a chocolate chip cookie in his general direction.

"We should hang out at the arcade tomorrow," Mike suggests, "We haven't been in forever."

"I'd be cool with that," Max shrugs, giving Lucas a nudge, "I gotta beat this nerd again."

Lucas smiles bashfully before turning to give her a brief peck on the cheek.

"Oh my god," Max grumbles, blushing profusely as she half-heartedly nudges him away.

"Jesus," Dustin groans, "You guys are so gross. You're almost as bad as Mike and El."

"What?!" Mike exclaims indignantly.

"We all know that you were playing footsie literally 5 minutes ago!" Dustin replies bluntly.

"...Oh," Mike falters, anger simmering into bashful self-consciousness.

"Yeah, it was pretty obvious," Lucas nods.

"We just didn't know if we should like, acknowledge your guy's grossness," Max adds.

"At least we understand the concept of privacy!" Mike says, pitching his voice into a squeaky whine as he imitates Max and points underneath the table.

Max has evidently run out of cookies to throw. She settles for flipping Mike off instead. Mike responds with a small smirk at her and when Max smirks back, he knows that she's not actually mad at him.

They continue to spend the next few minutes chatting idly until *Police On My Back* fades out. The lights dim ever-so-slightly as the music slows and The Police's *Every Breath You Take* begins to play throughout the gym. Students pair off as they begin to slow dance to the song, locked in somewhat stiff embraces.

Oh, shit.

Mike anxiously glances back at Will and El. They've stopped dancing and El is glancing around at the other couples in uncertainty. Taking advantage of the fact that her back is turned, Will faces Mike and gives him a pointed look.

*Get clover year!* Will mouths.

*What?* Mike mouths back, brow furrowed in confusion.

*Get rover clear!* Will tries again.

Mike, still lost, just shakes his head in bewilderment.

Will rolls his eyes, evidently deciding to give up on mouthing. Instead, he points to Mike, then at El, and then at the slow dancing couples behind them.

*Get over here.*

Oh.

Mike turns to look at the rest of his friends, but Max and Lucas are already getting up and moving over to the dance floor, leaving Mike and Dustin alone.

"You gotta get in there, Mike," Dustin advises, motioning to Will and El.

"But what about you?" Mike asks Dustin concernedly.

Dustin shrugs.

"Are you going to ask Jennifer to dance?"

"Nah," Dustin sighs, shaking his head, "I mean, Max has a point. I don't really wanna be anyone's second choice, you know?"

"Yeah," Mike nods, "Still. I don't wanna leave you here alone."

"I think Will's coming back," Dustin shrugs, "I'll live. We can like, recite the periodic table again."

"Are you sure?" Mike frowns.

"Oh my god, yes!" Dustin sighs exasperatedly, "Just go dance with El already!"

"Okay!" Mike flushes, turning to make his way over to the dance floor.

"You got this, Mike!" Dustin calls after him, "Just don't screw things up!"

As Mike walks closer to the dance floor, he passes Will, who's making his way back to the table.

"Good luck," Will whispers as they pass by.

"Thanks," Mike whispers back.

Will nods and goes to join Dustin at the table.

"Hydrogen!" Dustin greets, raising his hand.

"Helium!" Will smiles, high-fiving him.

Mike throws them one last smile before he refocuses on the main objective at hand: slow-dancing with El.

As he makes his way over, El spins to face him. Her eyes light up as he steps closer to her and she gives him an eager little smile that's so cute, it nearly makes Mike's heart melt.

He comes to a stop in front of her, mouth a little dry and hands a little clammy.

*You got this.*

"Hey!" Mike greets warmly.

"Hi!" El responds excitedly.

Mike swallows as he glances at the rest of the slow-dancing couples. "So, I mean...I guess we should like...you know. I mean, if you want to, that is. We don't have to. We could just like stand here, or go sit back down, or—"

El cuts him off by wrapping her arms around his neck. She pulls herself against him, and Mike feels his brain go numb for a second. Thankfully, he's still present enough to respond on instinct. His arms reach out to hold her waist, and then they're swaying in place, lightly moving to the beat. The slow rhythm is much easier for Mike to follow than the previous fast-paced ones, so he's greatly relieved to not be tripping over his or El's feet.

Mike can feel the warmth from her fingertips radiating onto his nape. It's probably a weird thing to notice, but he can't help but take note of how delicate her fingers feel against his skin. It's ironic, knowing just how much power she possesses, just how destructive she could be. And yet, with Mike, she's nothing but gentle. Her touch sends shivers down his spine and makes the corners of his vision seem a little fuzzy.

When their gazes meet, Mike finds himself unable to look away. It sounds totally cliché, but he really does feel like a moth drawn to her light. Maybe because everything about El is so *radiant*. Her soft, tender smile. The spinning lights of the disco ball that reflect off her cheeks. The way her pink eyeshadow shimmers when she blinks. It almost makes him dizzy.

As the song continues to play, Mike finds himself analyzing the lyrics more than he probably should. "This song is kind of creepy," he mutters, "If you really think about it."

"Then don't think about it," El murmurs back, a playful smile curving her lips.

"But isn't it kind of weird, though?" Mike points out.

"I like weird," El says simply, giving him a pointed look.

If Mike was *almost* feeling dizzy before, he definitely is now. Her words make his heart skip a beat and flutter all at once in a small, spontaneous combustion sort of feeling.

"Oh," he murmurs, voice a little hoarse.

"Yeah," El murmurs back.

They move a little closer to each other without thinking. It happens as naturally and fluidly as the way Mike starts to run his fingers up and down her back, just like he always does when they're close like this.

When they're about to kiss like this.

Because, that has to be what's happening, right? He can feel El moving closer to him, and he's moving closer to her, and their breathing is slowing, and then she's *right there*, standing on tip-toe to meet his level.

*Oh god, this is happening.*

His eyes flutter close—

—and the song ends.

Though in reality, the music gently fades out, to Mike it sounds more like a vicious record scratch. He should have seen it coming, at this point. He's convinced that the universe is out to make sure he never gets to kiss El.

But, unlike every other time they've gotten interrupted, El doesn't pull away when the song ends. Instead, she leans in even closer and brings her lips close to his ear.

"Follow me," she whispers, breath tickling his skin.

"Huh?" Mike whispers back, sounding confused.

El pulls back and grasps his hand. "I want to show you something," she says shyly.

Um. Ok.

"Alright," Mike shrugs, "What?"

There's a mischievous glint in El's eye as she gives his hand a tug and leads him off the dance floor. As the new song picks up in tempo and the other students go back to dancing rowdily, Mike and El dash under the balloon arch and head out into the hallway.

The hallways are mostly abandoned, so as they run down the hallway, their sneakers make loud echoes as they squeak against the tiled floors.

"Where are we going?" Mike exclaims with an anxious smile, still allowing El to pull him along.

"You'll see," El teases, glancing over her shoulder at him.

As she heads towards the back of the school, Mike starts to get an idea of what place she has in mind. After all, it is Homecoming — it seems pretty appropriate that she'd want to come back to the spot that started it all, their own twisted version of a home away from home.

He just wishes that this spot didn't have to be grossest classroom at Hawkins High.

El slides to a stop in front of the detention room door, still grasping onto his hand. "In here!" She announces, pointing toward the door.

"Why do you want to go in here?" Mike balks.

"It's where we met!"

"Yeah, but it's also the most disgusting classroom in the entire school."

Like, I don't know anyone that chooses to hang out here if they don't have to."

"I know," El says with a smile that's almost a smirk, "We'll be alone."

Mike totally takes back his previous 'heart-combustion' sentiment, because the way his heart fluttered while they slow danced is incomparable to the nuclear detonation that goes off in his chest when El says that.

"Oh!" Mike replies, voice cracking in a completely embarrassing way.

El gives him a knowing look before she moves to turn the doorknob of the classroom door—

—Only to find that it's locked.

"Shit," El mumbles, jiggling the doorknob a couple times.

"It's locked!?" Mike pales, not even bothering to mask his disappointment. Oh god, it can't be locked. Mike never thought he'd ever want to willingly go into the detention classroom (on a Saturday, no less), but right now getting inside that classroom might as well be a matter of life or death, it's that important to him.

"Don't worry," El assures him. She glances down the hallway, confirming that they truly are alone, before she narrows her eyes and stares at the lock determinedly.

It takes Mike a second to tell what's going on, but then he hears the quiet click of lock tumblers shuffling in place, and that's when he realizes she's *picking the lock with her mind and HOLY SHIT it's so COOL!*

A few moments later, El successfully manages to unlock the door. She pushes it open with a confident smile.

"You're amazing!" Mike gushes, "Like, that was so freaking cool and you're so cool and *holy shit!*"

"Thank you," El shrugs modestly.

Mike only continues to smile at her like a huge, love-struck idiot, so El takes the lead and pulls him into the classroom with her.

Even though the lights are off, the room is still dimly lit by the glow of the streetlights outside the back window. El locks the door behind them before leading Mike over to the ledge that runs beneath the back wall.

El takes a seat on the ledge but keeps her back to the window, instead turning to face Mike. Mike comes to a stop to stand in front of her, and even though she's sitting propped on the ledge, he still has to tilt his head downward to meet her gaze.

El wraps his arms around his neck, Mike places his hands on her hips, and it almost feels like they're dancing again. Only this time, there's no music, no crowds. It's them. Only them. Mike and El. El and Mike. Their names sound so much cooler when they're together, honestly.

As El looks up at him, her fingers run through the ends of his slicked-back hair. Mike can see why she always likes it when he does this to her, because it feels amazing.

She's not saying anything and Mike's not sure if he's waiting for her to make the first move.

"So," He begins casually, "I gotta say, I didn't think I'd be spending Homecoming in detention."

El giggles and she suddenly looks so radiant again, but maybe that's just because the lights from the street lamps outside are making her skin look kind of glowy. "I'm a bad influence on you," she jokes lightly.

"You kind of are," Mike jokes back.

El's giggles fade away as she continues to look up at him. Her face falters as she slowly looks more contemplative and reflective.

"What is it?" Mike asks, eyeing her carefully.

El hesitates before she replies. "...Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course!" Mike assures her, "Anything!"

"Do you think..." El begins slowly, glancing down at the ledge underneath her, "Do you think that if you never came to sit by me, that we would never have become friends?"

Well, that's definitely not what Mike was expecting. "What?" He questions, frowning in confusion.

"Sometimes I think about what would have happened if you didn't sit by me," El explains, "I don't think you would have ever noticed me."

"What?! No!" Mike exclaims adamantly. While this is something that he's never really considered, even just picturing a life without El for a moment is too grating, "I definitely would have noticed you!"

"Really?" El replies hopefully.

"Definitely!" Mike nods, "Even if I didn't come sit by you in detention, I know that we would have talked another way."

He can feel the tension ebbing away from El as he talks, so he continues eagerly.

"I feel like you and I," he continues, starting to feel a little shy, "We're like...connected, you know? Like no matter what, we always would have found each other."

"Like soulmates?" El brightens.

"No, not soulmates..." Mike replies truthfully, because the word just doesn't sit right with him. Calling El his *soulmate* would make him feel like one of the mushy guys in the soap operas he and El watched together.

"Oh," El pouts.

"We're more like..." Mike tries, racking his brain for the perfect analogy. Peanut Butter and Jelly? Eggos and El? Han and Leia? The Force and Luke? Star Wars and everything? Why can't he get his mind of Star Wars?

*Star Wars, stars...*

And that's when it clicks into place.

"We're like binary stars!" Mike explains excitedly, thinking back to the many nights he's spent buried in the pages of his science textbooks.

"Is that a Star Wars thing?" El interrupts, suddenly looking anxious.

"No?" Mike pauses, "Why?"

"No reason!" El replies briskly, "Just...keep talking."

Mike eyes her for a moment, but when El only nods encouragingly, he decides to continue. "Anyway," he sighs, "Binary stars are like, gravitationally bound together. They have a mutual orbit around a common center, so they always stay close together. Some of them, contact binaries, get so close that their atmospheres kind of just merge together."

El's not moving. Though her gaze is soft, he can't tell if he's boring her or not. He probably is.

"I dunno," He amends bashfully, "It's just...it's better than saying we're like, soulmates, or something. Soulmates are cheesy and everything, but binary stars are actually real, and like...they're not made for each other, or anything, but when they find each other, then that's it. They share mutual gravitation, and they just create their own little star system, and it's like super cool, and—"

He's rambling. He's rambling and El's smiling and *shit* — she's probably going to make fun of him for being such a *nerd*.

"—And I don't know what I'm saying," Mike sighs, lowering his head, "I probably just sound like a wasteoid."

"No," El murmurs. Her voice is so quiet and yet so firm, Mike finds himself looking right into her eyes again.

"No?" He echoes quietly, nervously.

"No," El repeats, still smiling, "It was perfect. You're...you're perfect."

Mike feels his cheeks warm, and though he has the urge to lower his head again — because this is too much, *El* is too much for him, and her compassion is going to be the death of him someday — he can't look away. Their gazes are locked, their breathing is slowed. His world has reduced to nothing more than the scent of lavender and the feeling of her fingers running through the hair at the nape of his neck.

*You're beautiful*, Mike says, or at least, he thinks he does. As El uses the arms she has wrapped around his neck to slowly pull him closer to her, Mike honestly can't tell if he voiced the sentiment, or if it was just another one of the hazy thoughts drifting through his current consciousness.

El moves in so that their faces are only centimeters apart, and for a blissful, anticipatory moment, Mike wonders if she's going to kiss him.

She doesn't.

Instead, she whispers his name, so soft he feels the breath of it more than he hears it.

*"Mike."*

*"Yeah?"* He murmurs back.

*"Kiss me."*

Mike doesn't need to be told twice. He tilts his head ever-so-slightly and closes the distance between them. Their lips meet and time stands still.

At first Mike's pretty sure that he's dreaming. He has to be. It's the only plausible scenario that would explain how he's lucky enough to be kissing El Hopper (telekinetic, total bad ass, girl of his dreams).

But then El sighs into him, and he can so vividly hear just how hopelessly happy she sounds, and he can taste the hints of strawberry lip gloss and sugar cookies that linger on her lips, and he can feel his

fingers curling into the satin bow on the back of her dress, and he realizes that this is way too detailed to be a dream.

Her kisses are warm, impossibly soft, and completely addicting. Much too soon, Mike finds that the light-headedness he's feeling isn't from how amazing this feels, but rather due to a lack of oxygen.

Going against every natural instinct that tells him to *stay*, to *keep going* because this is just so *impossibly perfect*, he pulls back for air.

As Mike stops to catch his breath, El breathes out shakily. Her lashes flutter as she blinks up at him, looking dazed and ethereal.

Mike's not sure if he's supposed to say or do something now — his heart is racing and the room feels like it's spinning; it's kind of hard to think. So, of course, what he winds up saying is completely moronic.

"Thanks," he says, for some unknown, asinine reason.

El blinks at him a moment longer, seeming confused, but then she's smiling, and then her smiles turn into giggles, and then she's kissing his cheeks, his nose, and his forehead, completely overwhelmed with giddiness.

"You're welcome," she replies once she's finished, voice light and breathless.

Mike, feeling like his brain probably just exploded, just nods dazedly in response.

He knows he's smiling like a total dweeb, and that he probably has some of her lip gloss on his mouth, since she removes her arms from his neck and wipes her thumb across his mouth—

—He just really doesn't care. Like, at all.

El finishes wiping her lip gloss off his mouth and pauses to study his face more closely. She looks both reflective and adoring, kind of how she had when they'd cuddled in the sleeping bag and she told him his freckles were like stars (without a doubt, the best compliment he's ever received).

Mike keeps his arms around her waist, completely captivated by the sight of her. They'd just *kissed* and El had actually *liked* it and he needed to do it again.

"They have a bet," El mentions as she looks at him, her lips curving into a playful grin, "All of our friends."

"Really?" Mike smiles back, not fully processing what she's saying. A bet? What even was a bet, anyway? Who were their friends again? When could they go back to kissing? Could he just lean in and kiss her again, or would that be too rude? Han had just kissed Leia while she was in the middle of talking, so maybe—

"Mmm hmm," El nods, "Max won. She said that you would kiss me."

At the mention of Max, Mike snaps out of his lovesick daze. "Wait, *what?*" He frowns.

El rolls her eyes and nudges him playfully. "Our friends bet on whether or not we would kiss," she explains, "And how we would do it. Max won because she bet that you would kiss me."

Mike doesn't know whether to feel pleasantly flustered or thoroughly annoyed. Right now, it's an uncomfortable combination of both. "Oh my god," he mumbles.

"I know," El gripes.

"Well...technically, Max didn't even win," Mike points out, "Because you asked me to kiss you."

"You still did it first," El counters.

"I did," Mike nods, still a little amazed about that fact.

El hesitates and glances at his mouth before asking shyly, "Could you do it again?"

She looks so adorably hopeful, Mike would have to be completely insane to say 'no.' So, smiling back at her, he nods, closes his eyes, lowers his head, and—

*"Ouch!"* Someone exclaims.

God damn it.

The voice is muffled, but still distinguishable. El and Mike pull apart and turn to look at the direction it came from — the classroom door.

There's a thin, glass panel in the center of the door. Though the window can't be more than 4 feet in height and 2 in length, Mike sees that Max, Dustin, Lucas, and Will are all fighting to look through it together. Their faces are crammed together as they peer into the detention classroom.

Max is wincing, and she turns to look at Will with annoyance. "You stepped on my foot!"

"Sorry!" Will apologizes profusely.

Mike and El look directly at their friends, both stone-faced.

Once their friends see that they've been spotted spying, there's a collective gasp.

"Shit!" Dustin yelps, "They saw us!"

"Run!" Lucas hisses, nudging past everyone.

The sound of running footsteps echoes throughout the outside hallway as Mike and El's friends dash away from the doorway, speeding back towards the gym with frenzied laughs and teasing shouts.

"I'm going to kill them," Mike grumbles, glaring at the doorway, "Were they there the entire time?"

"I don't know," El sighs, "Probably."

Mike holds back a groan of annoyance. He's starting to accept the fact that's he's never going to be able to kiss El without interruption of some kind. "We're never gonna be alone together," he complains.

El, seemingly determined to remedy this, turns her attention back to

the far more interesting task at hand. She idly runs her fingers down the front of his leather jacket before grasping it with both hands and tugging him closer to her.

"Come here," she pleads, "Please."

Mike turns his head to look at her, frustration easily ebbing away once he focuses in on her again. "Hey," he smiles.

"Hey," El smiles up at him lovingly before leaning in for another kiss. It takes Mike by surprise at first, since he's still kinda reeling from their first kiss, but he quickly relaxes into her tender embrace.

Though their kisses are still a little bashfully chaste and hesitantly explorative, Mike's never felt more whole, more certain of anything in his life.

He's falling in love with El.

Maybe he already *is* in love.

It's a terrifying revelation and yet completely comforting at the same time. It enters his mind (or his it his heart?) as subtly and swiftly as a wispy daydream, but once its there, he can't shake it. Even if he could, he wouldn't want to. He'd be more than happy to just stay in this moment for the rest of his life.

The two times that Mike was in this classroom for detention, time always seemed to drag by at an impossibly sluggish rate. He never thought that this would work in his favor, but it does. As he raises his hands to cup El's cheeks, time is deliciously slow. Seconds fade into minutes, minutes fade into complete nonexistence, and Mike can almost swear that this moment is infinite.

## 16. Epilogue

It's the 14th of December. Mike and El are seated on her bed, legs crossed as they face each other. Fat, flaky snowflakes fall against her bedroom window, dissolving into water droplets that trail down the glass. Though it's only 4:30, the world outside is already fading into a charcoal-grey, and El has to keep her beside lamp on in order for them to see each other properly.

El fidgets with the index card she's holding in her hand. As she talks, she flutters it back and forth, willing herself not to look at it.

"Genes are..." She begins slowly, mind working frantically. She pauses as she tries to remember the definition she'd copied onto the notecard. Their Biology oral presentation is only a few days away, and she has to have this memorized by then.

Mike smiles at her as he gives her an encouraging nod. "You got this!" He assures her.

El throws him a grateful look before continuing. "They're...segments, segments of..." She shuts her eyes. Maybe she can *see* the word if she tries hard enough.

"Deo—?" Mike offers.

"Deoxyribonucleic acid!" El exclaims, "DNA!"

"There you go!" Mike beams proudly. As El smiles proudly, he adds a hesitant offer, "Are you sure you don't want me to start our speech? I don't want you to feel so much pressure to say all these hard words."

"No," El refutes with a small shake of her head, "I want to do it. I want to get it right."

Mike gives a nod of assent. "Okay."

"Besides," El adds casually, "Pressure isn't always bad." Her voice is light, nonchalant, unrevealing. Nevertheless, Mike seems to pick up on the coy connotations she's purposely giving.

She really shouldn't do this to him, but she can't help herself. He just always gets so *flustered* looking and it's completely adorable.

"Uh, yeah," he admits, voice a little higher, "I guess pressure isn't always so bad."

El gives him a knowing look before continuing with her speech. "DNA synthesizes the proteins in our bodies," she states, "Each molecule is a...a double helix shape. The helix is made of two strands, one of sugar, or...deo...deo..."

Her voice trails off as she tries to think of the proper name. Why did every word have to start with *deo*? After a few silent moments pass, she gives up and takes one glance at her notecard. "Deoxyribose! One strand is sugar, or deoxyribose, and the other is phosphate molecules."

Mike is still looking pretty riled up. His cheeks are still pink and he keeps staring at her all wide-eyed. He's so distracted by something that he doesn't even congratulate her on her successful pronunciation.

At least, not in the way that she expects.

When he only blinks at her, El pouts a little. "I know I had to glance at the notecard," She confesses, "But I can keep trying. I don't want Mrs. Hawthorne to take off presentation points for reading off my notes."

"No!" Mike finally exclaims, "You...you sounded great!"

El gives him a skeptical look. "Then why do you look so...weird?"

"I do?"

"Yes," El smirks, raising her finger to bop his nose lightly. She turns her attention back to the index card in her hand. Maybe if she keeps looking at it, she'll be able to memorize all the big words easier.

"I'm sorry," Mike sighs, "It's just...you sounded really good."

"You said that already."

"No, I mean like...*really* good."

El frowns — not only because the words she's reading are making her head hurt, but also because there's no way her boyfriend is actually getting worked up over her reading off scientific terminology.

She glances up at him, just to make sure she's not making assumptions, but nope — he's giving her that *look*. The look that's a hopelessly smitten mix of flushed cheeks, dark eyes, and a hopeful smile.

He's seriously the biggest nerd ever.

"Thank you," El replies dryly, forcing herself not to smile as she looks down again.

There's a moment of silence and El can practically feel the tension brewing between them. Maybe tension isn't the right word though. It sounds so negative, and this feeling is anything but. It's like growing embers — warm and comforting with the potential for *more*.

After a minute or so of El looking over her notes, Mike interrupts the quiet. "Your dad's not home, is he?" He asks, glancing at the doorway.

"No," El replies, not looking up from her index card, "He has work, and then he's going to help Will's mom go get a Christmas tree. He said that we'll go to Will's house tomorrow to help decorate it." El pauses as she processes this before adding, "You know, I think Max is right. I think he might like Joyce. He's been acting so *weird* around her lately. I guess I'll see tomorrow."

She realizes that she's been rambling (a trait she's starting to pick up from hanging around Mike all the time), and probably taken the longest way possible to answer Mike's simple question. "Anyway," she concludes, glancing up at Mike, "He's not home. Why?"

"Because," Mike smiles shyly, "If he was, I'd kinda be too scared to do this."

"To do what?" El frowns, but then without warning, Mike cups her face in his hands and pulls her in for an affectionate kiss.

Oh.

*Oh.*

El smiles against his lips as she uses her index card to playfully swat his shoulder. She wants to tease him for being such a big dork, or maybe say 'deoxyribose,' again, just to mess with him, but as their kiss increases in intensity, she starts to lose all coherent thought.

Mike is still the smartest person El knows. Not only that, but he's also the fastest learner she knows. He's a sponge for information. He can finish a book in a matter of hours or watch a documentary once and he'll remember practically everything he learned.

This apt for quick learning naturally extended to everything, including kissing. The kisses they'd shared during the first couple weeks of their relationship had been soft and reserved. Neither really had any clue what they were doing, but that's kind of what made it so fun — they got to figure it out together.

Mike was a very dedicated learner. He paid attention to every hitch of her breath, every contented sigh, every moan she blushingly tried to hide. Needless to say, his dedication paid off.

Like right now, for example. He pulls back just enough to capture her lower lip in an impassioned kiss. He uses his teeth to ever-so-gently tug and bite, and that's when El just melts like the snowflakes against the windowsill.

Or, at least she *would* melt if she could get comfortable enough. Because as wonderful as Mike's kisses are, they're both still sitting with their legs crossed, which means they have to strain their necks to reach other, and it's starting to get a little uncomfortable. Plus, they're surrounded by their Biology textbooks, notes, and binders, so it's a little crowded too.

She needs to fix this.

With a flick of her hand, El uses her powers to push all their schoolwork off her bed. It falls to the floor in a flurry of thudding books, fluttering notebook paper, and clattering pencils, but El could

care less. She can always pick it up later, but she needs more of Mike now.

When their school things hit the floor, Mike pulls away in startled confusion. "What just happened?" He asks, looking at the mess.

El only grins as she uncrosses her legs and slides closer to him. "We need more room," she says simply, obviously.

"Oh," Mike grins back, looking unfairly adorable.

El leans in to pepper him with kisses because she really can't get enough of him, she never will, and she doesn't quite know what else to do with the warm, bubbly feeling growing near her gut. Her heart rate spikes as she continues to shower Mike with kisses. He's all squirms and laughs and bashful exclamations of her name and El just wants *more*.

She pulls back and, with a playful smile, pushes Mike back onto the pillows. Mike falls backward, looking breathlessly excited—

—And winds up gasping in pain.

"Shit!" Mike groans, rubbing the back of his head.

"Mike?" El pales, looking alarmed. She hadn't pushed him *that* hard, had she? He'd just landed on her pillow—

Shit.

"I hit my head on something," Mike frowns, turning to look under the pillow. He retrieves the Hawkins High 1984 yearbook with a puzzled look on his face. "What the—?"

*Shit, shit, shit, shit.* WHY hadn't she gotten rid of that yet!?

"Give me that!" El pleads.

She throws herself at him, but Mike shifts to the side and she falls face-first on the pillows instead.

"Jesus, El!" Mike exclaims, sounding torn between laughter and

alarm, "What's wrong?"

"You can't look in it!" El snaps, squirming towards him.

"Why not!?" Mike asks, moving out of the way again. He looks at the yearbook more closely and spots the yellow Post-It notes. "Why do you have pages marked?"

El uses her powers to pull the yearbook out of Mike's hands and into her own. The impact causes her to fall back against the pillows, but she doesn't let go of the yearbook. She already had to go through this with Max, there's no way she's going to do it again.

However, just like Max, Mike is incredibly persistent.

"I wanna see!" He pleads, moving to hover over her.

"No!" El insists, holding the yearbook close to her heart as she looks up at him.

"Please?" Mike begs, giving her his signature puppy dog pout.

"No!" El repeats. She has to shut her eyes to avoid his pout. It's too adorable, too powerful, and she knows she won't be able to maintain her resolve if she keeps looking at him.

Of course, shutting her eyes turns out to be a fatal mistake, as that's when Mike strikes. Without warning, he leans forward and attacks her sides, tickling her relentlessly.

"Mike!" El squeals, trying to squirm away. "S-stop!"

Mike only grins as he continues to wriggle his fingers over her stomach, sides, and hips. He *knows* how ticklish she is, because he's done this before, and El both loves it and hates it.

As she writhes from his tickles, she raises her arms to defend herself. This causes the yearbook to fall from her grasp, and that's all Mike needs. He catches it as it falls, straightens up, and sits on top of El's legs so that she can't get up to grab the book from him.

"Does this hurt?" Mike asks, looking down at her.

"No!" El huffs, trying to squirm away.

"Good — just checking," Mike nods, turning his attention back to the yearbook.

She could use her powers to take the book back, but at this point, it seems pretty futile. Now that Mike knows about the yearbook, El can't really think of anything she could do to deter his curiosity. So, she instead settles for crossing her arms and glaring up at him as he begins to flip through the pages.

"Alright," Mike says, turning to the first sticky-noted page, "What do we got here?"

El remains silent as Mike looks over the page. When his gaze lands on the picture, *his* picture, the picture that she'd decorated with heart stickers after Homecoming night, his jaw drops.

"You were looking at my picture?" Mike gasps, glancing down at her.

El quirks an eyebrow at him. "Maybe."

Mike's eyes light up as his mouth curves into a smile. "Like...since when?"

*Here we go.*

"....Last year," El admits.

Mike keeps smiling as he turns to the second marked page, the one with his AV Club photo. "You were looking at this one too?!" He exclaims in shock.

"Yes," El sighs.

"Why!?"

El eyes him. Wasn't it obvious? "I liked you."

"You had a crush on me!?" Mike gawks.

El, still eying him warily, nods.

"Since *last year*!?"

Another nod.

At this admission, Mike bursts into laughter. It's not a deriding or mocking laugh though, but rather one that radiates with happiness, like he's stupidly, giddily excited about something.

"What's so funny?" El asks defensively.

"I can't believe you had a crush on me!" Mike replies gleefully, "That's like, so embarrassing."

"How?! We're dating!" El exclaims, hitting his thighs (the only part of him she can currently reach with him sitting on her legs and everything).

"I know!" Mike continues to laugh, "But still!"

"I hate you," El grumbles, poking his thighs a couple more times.

"Really?" Mike asks, turning to grin at her.

"Yes," El insists, hating how her gaze lands on his smile or, to be more concise, his lips. She knows she supposed to be (pretending to be) mad at him, but it's so hard when Mike sets the yearbook down, places his hands on either side of her, and hovers over her again.

El's style is still evolving. Instead of strictly sticking to slick-backed hair and leather jackets, she sometimes opts for freed curls and soft sweaters. Other times, it's a unique combination of both. She's also decided to let her hair grow out — in the past, she had to trim it regularly so that it wouldn't look too weird when it was slicked back. Now, she's allowing herself to just leave it be and see what happens.

Consequently, her hair is a little longer, a little curlier. When Mike lowers his face so that it's inches from hers, their curls brush in a way that almost makes El giggle, because they kind of match.

Mike has that *look* in his eyes as he scans her over. Still supporting himself with one hand, he carefully runs his opposite hand through her hair, over her shoulder, and down her arm. Despite the chill that

seeps into her room from the outside, his touch leaves trails of embers down her skin.

She loves when he's forward like this, when he's not afraid to get closer. It's admittedly rare, but lately he's been getting better, bolder.

Except for when he's not.

He's leaning in to kiss her when he suddenly pulls away, leaving her high and dry.

"Mike," El whines. She curls her fingers in the front of his shirt and tugs him back to her, "Come back."

Mike, for once, doesn't give into her pleads for kisses. Instead, he looks down at her torso skeptically, as if something has just dawned on him.

"What?" El asks nervously. *Is something wrong?*

"Isn't this my sweater?" Mike questions, tugging on the hem of the sweater she's wearing.

"Um," El hesitates, looking down at the article in question.

Was it his sweater? Her favorite sweater of his? The one he'd worn when he was fixing the projector, or during their first Biology lab? The sweater she'd found crumpled up on the floor of his bedroom when she hung out at his house last weekend? The sweater that she'd hastily stuffed into her backpack, just because she really wanted it? The sweater that was impossibly soft, and smelt like his soap, his laundry detergent, and the musk that was unmistakably *him*?

Obviously not.

"No!" El answers innocently.

"I'm pretty sure it is," Mike smirks, "So, like, first you're staring at pictures of me, and now you're stealing my clothes?"

El feels her cheeks flush red with embarrassment. "You left me 20 voicemails!" She reminds him.

"You snuck into my house," Mike counters.

"You got into a fight for me!"

"You got in one for me!"

"You bought me every kind of Eggos!"

"You're still obsessed with me."

*And you're still in love me,* El wants to say, but the words die in her throat. She doesn't know if she dares to say something so...so resonant. She knows that she's in love with Mike, but she's never told him. He's certainly never told her that he's in love with her. Even though 'in' is such a tiny word, to be *in* love with someone somehow seems so much more weighted than to just love someone.

"You're still dumb," she mumbles instead, averting her gaze.

"And you're still wearing my sweater," Mike mutters back, idly running a hand over her sleeve.

This time, the words El wants to say come out before she can stop them. "Then come take it back," she offers, and this time, her connotations aren't coyly masked, but flirtatiously candid.

Mike's eyes widen in surprise, because she's never said anything like that, they've never *done* anything like that, but when El only smiles invitingly up at him, she's pretty sure she can pinpoint the exact moment his heart explodes.

"Okay," he mumbles back thickly, and then his lips are back on hers, and El is pulling at the back of his hoodie, dragging him closer to her.

She can feel her heart racing faster in her chest, filling her veins with adrenaline. She's not sure that she's ready to go super far, but she's definitely willing to test the waters a little...maybe a lot...

Mike lowers the arms he's been using to support himself. He instead allows himself to lie on top of her, all the while being careful not to move too quickly or crush her under his weight. El doesn't mind the feeling of him pressed against her though. The pressure is quite nice,

actually, but it's still not enough.

*More, her thoughts plead, more, more, more.*

She tentatively spreads her lips and Mike eagerly accepts the invitation. It's admittedly a little awkwardly clumsy at first — he doesn't know what he's doing, he hasn't learned, not yet — but then his tongue brushes against hers in just the right way, and El's pretty sure that she sees stars. The adrenaline pumping through her pulsates with an electric charge, like she's been struck by lightning or gotten her finger too close to an electrical socket.

As they continue to kiss openly, it idly occurs to El that neither of those are great analogies, as both would most likely get her killed. Then again, in that sense, maybe those are the perfect analogies, since Mike's kisses are certainly going to be the death of her.

His fingers are just brushing underneath the hem of her sweater when the doorbell rings.

El and Mike don't part at the sound, not at first. Instead, Mike keeps kissing her with an increased sense of urgency.

She doesn't want to stop, but then the doorbell rings a second time, and El can't bring herself to ignore it, especially since she knows who it is.

"Mike," El says as she grudgingly pulls away, "We have to go."

Mike doesn't seem to care. He stays connected to her like static cling, moving his lips to her neck the moment she breaks their kiss. He nibbles and sucks on her skin fervently, seemingly determined to convince her to stay through his kisses.

"Mike," El repeats. She tries to make her voice sound firm and reprimanding, but it's so, so hard when his mouth is doing *that*.

"Five more minutes," Mike pleads, breath hot against her skin.

"Our friends are here," El reminds him.

"They can wait," Mike shrugs, not moving away.

"It's snowing. They can't wait in the cold."

"Says who?"

"Says...nice people."

"I'm a nice man," Mike quotes.

"No you're not," El quotes back, "You're a scoundrel."

Mike replies by smiling into the crook of her neck. He continues to kiss and bite her there with a renewed fervor, much to El's reluctant enjoyment (also: why did he always have to get so worked up over Star Wars? He's responding way too eagerly to her quoting it to him).

"*Mike*," she pleads.

"*El*," Mike whines back.

El jokingly muses to herself that her true powers aren't telekinesis, but rather the strength it takes to pull away from Mike. She forces herself to squirm out from under him and get off the bed, making sure to step over the mess of their school things on the floor.

Mike makes a disappointed whining sort of sound, like a kid who'd just gotten a time-out. He rolls onto his back and stays on top of her bed, pouting at her.

"I have to get the door," El says as the doorbell rings for the third time.

"Why don't you get the door, bring them to the living room, then come back up here?" Mike suggests.

When El was in middle school, Hopper had given her The Talk. It was horribly uncomfortable for both of them, but Hopper pointed out that it was necessary because she was getting older and needed to be careful, since boys only ever had 'One Thing On Their Minds.'

This much is evident in Mike's case. Whenever they get intimate like this, it's obvious that he has One Thing On His Mind: not pressuring her or going all the way, but anxiously waiting until they can kiss

again and planning exactly how he can make that happen. El only knows this because she often feels the same way.

Except for right now, when all of their friends are downstairs.

"I'm not doing that," El snorts.

"Please?" Mike pleads, "I miss you."

"I'm right here!"

"But you're not over *here*."

"Correct!" El teases.

Mike groans dejectedly and slumps back on the pillows.

"Maybe we can continue later," El offers.

"Really?" Mike asks, perking up excitedly.

"*Maybe*," El reiterates.

"When's later?"

"I'll tell you."

"Fine," Mike sighs, rising from the bed. He moves to stand in front of her, leans in, and presses one final kiss to the tender sore spot on her neck.

—*Wait a minute.*

El gasps in alarm as she runs to her dresser and grabs the handheld mirror lying atop it. When she looks at her reflection, her worries are confirmed: Mike's left a huge, mauve-colored mark on her neck, right above her collarbone.

If their friends see it, they'll never let it go. It'd be the next Fruit Loops debacle.

"I can't believe you!" El huffs. She turns around to glare at Mike, but he only replies with a smirk. It's the same kind of smirk he'd given

her when he'd said 'bullshit' just to get detention with her: accomplished, self-satisfied, and irritatingly endearing.

"Sorry," Mike says, not sounding apologetic in the slightest.

El turns back to the mirror with another huff. She plays with the collar of her (Mike's) sweater, trying to get it to lay over the hickey, but it doesn't work. The sweater just slumps back down every time, leaving her neck exposed.

Damn it.

"Here," Mike offers, walking over to her side. He peels off his navy hoodie and hands it to her, leaving him in a collared shirt. "This should help."

El turns to accept the hoodie and slips it on. Thankfully, the hoodie is bulky enough to cover her collarbone.

It also smells like him. So, that's like, an additional bonus.

"Thank you," El softens, already secretly plotting how she can keep this hoodie.

"You're welcome," Mike smiles back, leaning down to give her lips a small peck.

El beams up at him. It takes everything within her to not lean back in for another kiss, but she knows that if she does, she won't be able to stop.

Plus, then the doorbell rings for the fourth time, and then the fifth, and sixth, and she realizes that their friends are probably getting impatient.

"Let's go," El instructs, grasping Mike's hand and leading them out of her room.

Mike follows her dutifully, interlacing their fingers as they head to the stairs. "Why do our friends have the worst timing ever?"

"They're here at the time we told them to be," El reminds him.

"I know," Mike whines, "But still."

"I still don't see why we would couldn't do this at your house," El replies as she and Mike, still hand-in-hand, descend the stairs together.

"Because, Nancy just came home for Christmas break!" Mike explains, "And the last time you guys hung out together at Thanksgiving, you went through my baby pictures with my mom and it was totally embarrassing!"

"Exactly," El replies, giggling at the memory.

"Exactly' is right," Mike huffs.

"Well, your mom invited me over for Christmas Eve," El reminds him, "So, I'll see her then."

"Fine with me — that gives me plenty of time to hide every photo album we own."

El throws him a light-hearted eye roll before she stops in front of the entryway door and opens it.

They're greeted by the sight of all four of their friends bundled in puffy coats, long scarves, and knit hats. Their noses and cheeks are a frosted pink, and as the door swings open, a rush of icy December wind rushes into the foyer.

"Finally!" Max exclaims.

"We were freezing our asses off out here!" Dustin adds, teeth chattering.

"Thanks for inviting us over!" Will pipes up.

"Now let us in!" Lucas begs.

El and Mike move out of the way and allow their friends to hurry inside.

"I'm sorry you had to wait," El apologizes as they stomp the snow off

their boots. She releases Mike's hand and moves forward to close the front door, shutting out the bitter chill.

"We were studying for Bio upstairs," Mike adds, hands in his pockets.

"I'm sure you were," Dustin smirks.

"You guys are gonna ace the human anatomy section," Max adds wryly.

El and Mike's cheeks flush even redder than their friends', which is really saying something, since their friends still look like they're freezing.

"We're studying genetics!" El defends hotly, "Not...not that."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Lucas sighs, taking off his jacket and boots, "Let's just get started."

"Okay," El nods. After her friends remove their winter attire, she leads the way into the living room. There's a hearty fire flickering in the fireplace and a modest sized Christmas tree in the corner. The couches that normally rest in the center of the living room have been pushed to the sides of the room to make space for the folding table and chairs she and Mike set up earlier in the day. On top of the table rests the *Dungeons and Dragons* game board, along with all the pieces they'll need to play.

"You have a nice house," Will smiles, taking a seat in one of the chairs.

"Thank you!" El beams back. She motions to the coffee table off to the side, "I have some snacks if you guys get hungry. There's pretzels and cookies and candy canes and—"

"Oh my god," Dustin exclaims, already rushing to grab some of everything, "Your girlfriend is amazing, Mike."

Mike turns to throw El a small smile. "She is," he mumbles, so low that only El can hear it.

El almost starts to consider Mike's proposition to leave their friends in

here while they return to her room. Almost. But she knows that wouldn't be very polite, and besides, she did say that she and Mike could continue things later. 'Later' would only come after they finished this game, so she had to get a move on.

El goes to take her seat at the table, followed by Mike and Lucas. Max and Dustin join them a few moments later, both carrying several snacks.

"So," Mike begins, retrieving a binder from where he'd left it under the table, "Did you guys finish creating your characters?"

El nods proudly. She'd spent more time than she probably should have designing her Mage, but whatever — it was *fun*. Mike had helped her create a backstory for her character and everything. He also assured her that yes, her Mage could secretly be dating his Paladin, if that's what she really wanted (it was).

"Yeah, me too," Max concurs, "I had time to work on designing my character after I finished studying for my English final." As the words leave her mouth, She pauses and grimaces. "Oh my god, I think that's like, the geekiest thing I've ever said."

"One of us, one of us!" Dustin chants teasingly, pounding his fists on the table.

Max flicks a pretzel at him, the first of what will probably be many.

"What character class did you decide on?" Will asks Max.

"Zoomer," she answers confidently.

Though Mike's face is partially obscured by the DM's screen he's sitting behind, El's still able to catch the bewildered frown he makes. "A *what*?"

"A Zoomer," Max repeats.

The boys exchange hesitant glances. They all look like they're deciding whether or not to tell her something.

"That's not a real character class!" Dustin finally blurts out.

"So?" Max shrugs, "You said I could create my own."

"Your own *character*," Mike clarifies, "Not your own classes."

"Is there a difference?" Max asks flippantly.

"Kind of," Lucas admits.

"It's okay," Will assures Max, "I think it's cool that you created a new class." He turns to give the other boys warning looks, to which they reluctantly relent.

"Yeah," Mike sighs, "I guess it's cool."

"Super cool!" Lucas adds, sounding far more believable than Mike.

Dustin manages to not say any further challenging comments, but that doesn't stop him from shaking his head forlornly. "Anyway," he says, turning to Mike, "What's the name of this campaign?"

Mike clears his throat and replies in a dramatic, theatrical sort of voice. "Expedition to the Castle of the Forgotten King!"

"That's the title?" Max questions, raising an eyebrow.

"I didn't have a lot of time to come up with a better one, okay?!" Mike justifies, "I've been busy!"

"With El?"

"With studying for exams!"

"I think the title is great!" El cuts in, throwing Mike a reassuring look.

"Can we just start already?" Lucas pleads eagerly, "We haven't had a campaign in forever."

Mike clears his throat again before he proceeds to read the introduction to the campaign. He gets so dramatic about the entire thing, it's actually like, the cutest thing El's ever seen. He keeps reading in that theatrical voice, pauses to create tension, and uses his own sound effects to make it all feel so much more *real*.

El turns to glance at her friends excitedly, because this is already the best thing ever, but the rest of them are watching Mike seriously, listening closely, taking it all in. Even Max seems determinedly focused, so El decides that she better pay attention too.

As this is her and Max's first campaign, it takes a bit for them to fully get into it. The boys have to walk them through all the gameplay, like how to take actions, how to make die rolls, and how to gain experience points. It's all pretty complicated and confusing to El at first, but the boys are chivalrously patient with both her and Max.

As their adventure continues, the stakes grow higher. The action increases in tenfold, and soon they're all on the edges of their seats, hanging onto every last word of Mike's direction.

In the final moments of the campaign, through their collective skills and abilities, their party successfully slays the dragon that dwells in the dungeon beneath the castle. They then stumble across a trove of treasure, which Mike describes in vivid detail.

"You've found it!" Mike reads quickly, excitedly, "The lost treasure of the Forgotten King! While the dragon's lair was dank and decrepit, this room glows with the shine of thousands of jewels. Their light reflects off the towering abundance of golden coins, goblets, and crowns. Through your face is speckled with the blood of the slain dragon and the dirt of a journey long traveled, when you slip the crown onto your head, you feel the power of success flow through your veins. Your valiant efforts have paid off. You've won."

El and the rest of her friends burst into cheers. They exchange fist-bumps, high-fives, and sighs of relief.

"Holy shit! We're freaking *loaded!*" Dustin exclaims, "We're gonna have enough gold to do whatever we want!"

"What happens next?" El asks Mike enthusiastically.

"That's it," Mike shrugs, shutting his Dungeon Master's manual.

There's a beat of silence as everyone realizes that the story has come to an end.

"Wait, that's it?" Max frowns, "That's the ending?"

"Uh, yeah?" Mike replies, as if this was obvious.

"But we just got started!" Dustin whines.

"We've been playing for five hours!" Mike points out, holding up his watch. Sure enough, it's now well past 10 PM. The once-gray sky has now darkened into an inky black, leaving the fireplace as the main source of light in the room. The reflection of the flames dances off their faces, making everyone's faces glow with a warm amber light.

"It felt shorter," Lucas laments, "I think it should have been longer."

"Forget longer!" Max huffs, "It should have been better written!"

"What do you mean?" Mike asks indignantly.

"There's so many things that you either didn't finish, left out, or glossed over!" Max critiques.

"Like what?!"

"Like the prince!" Lucas offers, "You just left him stuck in the tower!"

"He'll get out!" Mike frowns.

"But what about the princess and her two knights?" Dustin adds, "You mentioned them like, once, and we never even got to meet them."

"Or the Captain of the Guard and the Halfling storekeeper?" Max says, "You kind of made it seem like they had some kind of relationship going on, and then it just went nowhere."

"None of those things mattered to the campaign!" Mike snaps, "All of those characters were NPC's! Why do you even care?"

"We were invested!" Dustin exclaims.

"Fine!" Mike huffs, "I'm sorry, I guess. But just because this adventure is over doesn't mean that the story of the campaign is over!"

"Are you going to continue it?" Will asks hopefully.

"Maybe!" Mike shrugs, "I dunno!"

"Well, if you do, it better be good," Lucas replies, "Like, better than this one."

"That won't be hard," Max snorts.

"Even if it wasn't perfect, it was good," El says definitively, "We had fun."

None of their friends can disagree with that.

"Yeah, I guess it was pretty fun," Max admits. Her eyes widen as she glances at everyone anxiously, "That doesn't leave this room."

"Too late," Dustin grins, "Your secret is out Max! You're a nerd!"

"I'm not!" Max insists.

"You like arcade games, Star Wars, and Dungeons and Dragons," El points out, counting off the items on her fingers.

"And Lucas," Mike teases.

Lucas and Max both try to look offended, but both of them know that everything El and Mike just said is completely true.

"We're all kind of nerds," Will summarizes, turning to give everyone a smile, "But that's good."

"Only because being normal is overrated," Max sighs, slumping back in her chair.

"It totally is," Mike nods.

The conversation concludes when one of their parents rings the doorbell. Every member of their party jolts at the sound. It feels as if some sort of spell has broken. Their adventure really is over, and it's time for them to return home.

Mr. Sinclair has arrived and offered to give Max a ride home, so the party gathers in the foyer to wish Lucas and Max goodbye.

"I'll see you Monday," Max murmurs to El as she hugs her goodbye.

"See you Monday," El mumbles back, hugging her friend tightly.

"And," Max adds, voice a dry whisper, "Next time you and President Nerd decide to get busy, you might wanna bring a scarf."

El frowns in confusion, but then she glances down and realizes that her hoodie has slipped lower, revealing that damned hickey.

El makes an embarrassed squeak as she quickly readjusts the hoodie, but Max only smiles, pulls away, and heads out the door hand-in-hand with Lucas.

Though the snowfall has stopped, the night is still bitingly cold. The streetlamp near El's house illuminates her front lawn, causing the untouched snow to shimmer. As Max and Lucas follow Mr. Sinclair to the car parked in the driveway, their steps leave wandering trails of footprints in their wake. El, Mike, Dustin, and Will watch them from the front doorway as they leave, waving goodbye forlornly.

"See ya' later dweebs!" Max calls out as Lucas boards his dad's car.

"Later, MadMax!" Dustin calls back.

For once, Max doesn't flip him off for the nickname. Instead, she only throws Dustin an exasperated smile before following Lucas into the car. Mr. Sinclair's car backs out of the driveway, and much too soon, Mrs. Henderson's car has taken its place.

Since Hopper and Joyce were going to get the Christmas tree today, Dustin's mom is going to drive him home.

"We're still gonna compare our *To Kill a Mockingbird* notes before our exam on Monday, right?" Dustin asks as he hugs El goodbye.

"Of course!" El nods.

"Awesome!" Dustin replies gratefully. He moves to wish Mike goodbye and Will steps up to hug El like Dustin had.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Will," El murmurs as she gives Will a

comforting hug goodbye.

"I can't wait!" Will replies excitedly, "I made a new mixtape for you, this one has Bowie on it!"

The mixtape exchange is a thing the two of them started recently — Will makes one for her with some of his favorite songs, and El does the same in return. Thanks to each other, El's grown an even bigger soft spot for pop, and Will has developed an appreciation for music that he likes to call 'loud, but good.'

"Mine has Metallica!" El smiles, "I think you'll like it. I'll give it to you tomorrow."

"Sounds good!" Will nods.

More goodbye hugs and lighthearted banter are exchanged before Dustin and Will leave through the front door. The house is noticeably quiet once their friends are gone, and even though El knows she's going to see them within the next couple days, she already misses having them here.

Mike returns to the living room and proceeds to pack up his Dungeons and Dragons supplies. El watches as he carefully sorts the pieces into bags and little boxes before placing everything into the messenger bag he likes to keep it all in. Once he finishes, he sets the bag on top of the table and goes to lie on top of the couch. As he lowers himself onto it, he lets off a heavy, tired sigh.

El knows that he puts so much effort into his campaigns and that he must be pretty exhausted, but she doesn't want him to get too sleepy, not yet.

She carefully tiptoes over to him, trying to stay as stealthy as possible. Mike doesn't hear or see her coming, and when he closes his eyes to sigh again, that's when she makes her move.

"Surprise!" El squeals, throwing herself on top of him.

Mike yelps in startled surprise as El lands on him. "El!" He exclaims as she wraps her arms around his neck, pulling herself up so that they're face-to-face.

"Mike!" El giggles, rubbing their noses together.

Any indignation Mike may have harbored over her surprise attack quickly melts away. His face softens as he looks up at her. Their chests are pressed together and El can feel that her heart is still racing from leaping on top him, and from just being *near* him.

She hopes that he feels it too.

"What time is your Mom coming to get you?" El asks after a moment, running her fingers through the back of his hair.

"11:00," Mike replies, lips curving into a gentle smile, "So, we still have like, plenty of time."

"Good," El smiles back.

Despite the fact that they're alone, *blissfully* alone, neither moves in to kiss the other. Instead, they take time to study each other's faces. Their features are still shadowed in the amber light of the fireplace, but now that they're on the couch, closer to the tree, their faces are also dotted with the colorful reflection of Christmas lights. Mike, with his warm shadows and vibrant highlights and cheekbones and effortlessly wavy hair, looks like a mosaic, like a work of art.

With the way Mike's looking at her, she gets the feeling that he's thinking something similar. He raises his thumb to brush against her lips, and El gives it a gentle, chaste kiss as it passes by.

The clock that's mounted on the wall ticks as the seconds pass. It's the only sound to be heard in this secluded living room, alongside Mike and El's steady, even breathing.

And then it happens.

"I think I'm in love with you," Mike whispers.

It's simple, down-to-earth, and not incredibly romantic. Well, at least not by the standards of the soap operas and romance movies she watches. On TV, the dashing love interests always proclaim their feelings with chauvinistic grandeur. There's sweeping music, profound and poetic declarations of love, and sometimes even a ring,

depending on the situation.

All of the romance movies she watches are kind of boring like that, El suddenly realizes. The movies don't even begin to capture what love really feels like. It's not always dramatic proclamations of adoration from a hunky, dreamboat actor. Sometimes love was a scrawny kid covered in heart-adorned band-aids showing up at her door with an armful of Eggos. Sometimes love was that scrawny kid comparing her to a star system. It didn't have to be poetic; sometimes it was only seven-words — tentatively whispered, yet resoundingly true.

The more El thinks about this, the more she realizes how silly she was for ever doubting that Mike loved her. That he was *in* love with her. The signs were right in front of her all along, she just wasn't daring enough to admit that they were true.

And so, when Mike tells her that he's in love with her, what else is there really to say?

"I know," El whispers back.

Mike's eyes widen. "Did you just—?"

—Quote Star Wars in response to his declaration of love?

Obviously.

El bites down on her lip as she tries not to giggle. "Yes."

There's no way to properly describe how Mike looks at her then. The only way El can really process it is in relation to other things.

He breathes out, like the way one might as a rollercoaster finally comes to an end. Like his nerves are still jumbled, his heart is still racing, but he can finally *breathe* again.

His body relaxes with contentment, like the way one's might after returning from a long trip away.

He reaches out to touch her cheek and his eyes are full with reverent wonder, like the way he looks at the photographs of galaxies in his science textbooks.

He looks at her like she's his sense of repose, his home, his *world*.

El knows that they're still young, probably too young to be feeling this *strongly* about each other, but as El into his eyes, her mind flutters with perennial, fragmented words like *binary stars, the one, and forever*.

She can't even think in complete sentences, that's what he's done to her.

Mike leans in so that their lips are only inches apart. His voice soft, loving — he whispers, "Hey, El?"

"Yes, Mike?"

"Is it later yet?"

In 15 minutes, Hopper will return from The Byers. Mike and El will jolt up from the couch with a start, blushing furiously and hoping that Hopper won't notice (he will).

Tomorrow, El will spend the day at the Byers, and as she helps Will decorate his Christmas tree, she'll notice the strange look her Dad gets on his face when he looks at Joyce, like he's *found* something.

In 11 days, it'll be Christmas morning. Mike will come over sometime during the afternoon to give her the necklace he'd gotten for her — a simple, silver chain adorned with two tiny stars. Hopper will give Mike his present — a new bike, and El won't be able to stop herself from taking a picture of the stupidly surprised look Mike gets on his face. Mike will get all huffy, because he *hates* pictures, but then when El gives him her present, a limited edition Star Wars comic book, all will quickly be forgiven.

In one year, one of El's best friends (and future step-brother), will finally confess the feelings he's been trying to sequester. El will assure Will that he's not a freak, that there's nothing wrong with him, just like he'd done to her.

In less than two years, during the summer between their Junior and Senior year, El will finally grow tired of wanting *more* of Mike, instead needing *all* of him. It'll be another learning curve peppered

with '*are you sure?*' and '*is this okay?*' (she'll be completely sure; it'll totally be more than ok), but as always, they'll figure it out together.

As time goes on, there'll only be more things to figure out about love. Mike and El's future, while currently unknown to the both of them, is still unfurling and expanding with every moment they spend together. There'll be time to discover what's in store, all the time in the world, actually, but right now—

"Yes," El murmurs, brushing her lips against his cheek, then his jaw,  
"It's later."

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[A/N] : Aaaaaand I cried writing this. Not ashamed to admit that.

I want to give a big thank you to everyone who has taken the time to read this story. Writing it has been such an experience and I wouldn't have been able to finish it without your constant love and support.

While this story has come to an end, I'm definitely going to be creating more stories and different AUs. I already have another (much shorter) multi-chap planned, as well as some one shots. Stay tuned here, or find me on Tumblr for more info!

Once again, thank you so, so, so much. You are all beautiful little stars and I love you all.